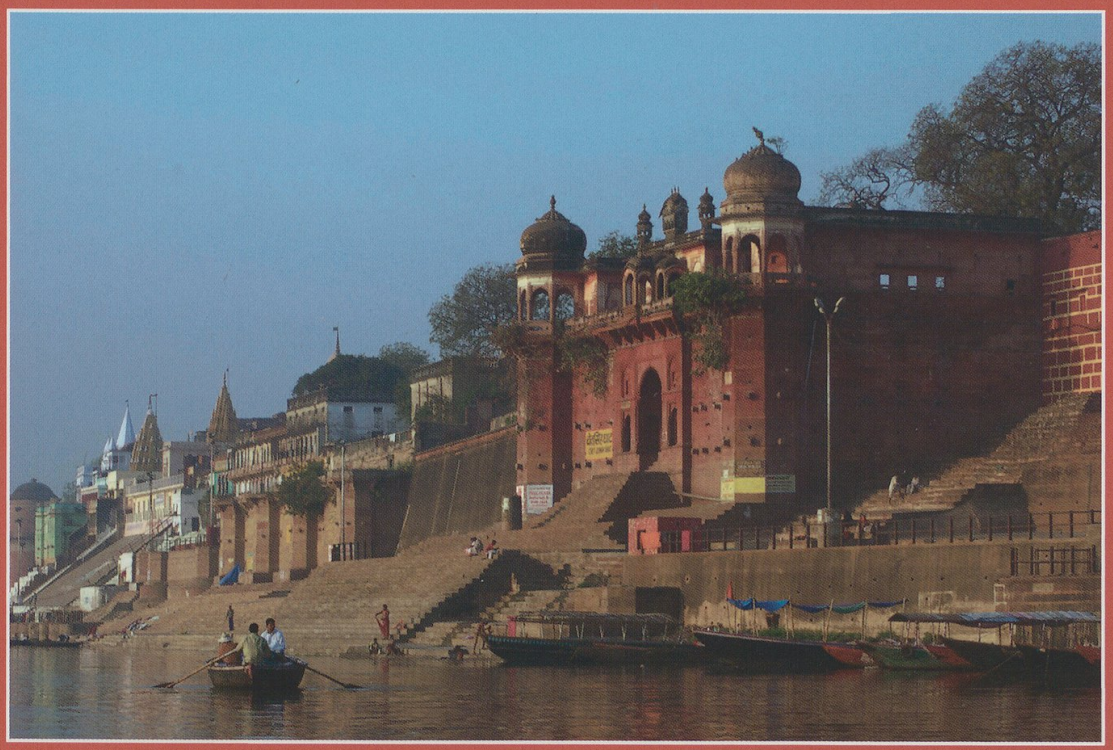
Banāras Revisited

Scholarly Pilgrimages to the City of Light

Edited by
István Keul



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Cover: Banāras, view of the southern ghāṭs, in the foreground the Chet Singh palace, 18th cent. (spring 2004, photo by István Keul)

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Banāras Revisited: Introduction

István Keul

In October 2011 the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim was host to a week-long series of conferences, seminars, and workshops grouped together under the – laconic and felicitous – title 'India 2011.'[1] While the primary aim of the event was to initiate and improve existing cooperation between Norway and India in terms of education, research, and business development, all university departments were invited to contribute from their own fields towards disseminating knowledge about Indian culture, not only in an academic context but also to a larger public. It was under these circumstances that the idea of a conference on Banāras cropped up and materialized into a program intended to appeal to all those interested (academically or otherwise) in India and her culture, and, at the same time, to contribute as meaningfully as possible to the vast corpus of existing Banāras-related scholarship.[2]

The participants in this conference were invited to talk about their past and present research in Banāras, and to reflect on their encounters and experiences in a city that visitors have described as a veritable microcosm of India: multi-faceted and complex, vibrant and full of contradictions. The conference and, for that matter, the resulting volume were conceived as a collection of combined reflections on research interests and personal insights, and as an attempt at evaluating the weight of the 'Banāras experience' for individual biographical histories and academic careers. The scholars participating in the conference came from various disciplines (history, anthropology, South Asian studies, the study of religions, architecture, literature), and their travels to Banāras spanned periods of different lengths: from more than five decades to around four years. The large diversity of approaches and the broad spectrum of voices and attitudes in the present collection's contributions are a direct and natural consequence of this variety.

The socio-cultural universe of Banāras has been and continues to be an inexhaustible treasure chest of themes and topics for scholarly research. The conference and the present volume represent another illustration of this abundance, with themes

1 'India 2011' was the third in a line of similar events after 'Japan 2002' and 'Poland 2006.'

2 The constantly revised and updated online *Banaras Bibliography* prepared by Jörg Gengnagel and Axel Michaels (http://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/abt/IND/publikation/bibbanaras/bibbanaras.php (accessed on 8 July 2013)), and Chapter 4 in Rana P. B. Singh's *Banaras, The Heritage City of India: Heritage, History, and Bibliography* (Varanasi: Indica, 2009) constitute vast bibliographic resources on Banāras-related scholarship.

ranging from the sensory aesthetics of everyday life to the history of the Marathas in Banāras; from Harishchandra, the 'father' of modern Hindi, to the 'tribals' of Nagwa; from the architecture of the ghāṭs to the works of the Austrian writers Stefan Zweig and Josef Winkler; from 'informative relationships' with research assistants to the mediatization of goddesses; from reflections on public education to a contemporary literary chronicler of Assī; from 'colonial ghosts' in the 1950s to present-day Western travelers.

In addition to its thematic diversity, this volume on Banāras benefits from another strong asset: the voices of its contributors, clearly audible in narrative and reflexive passages in most essays, more restrained in others. These passages and personal vignettes contribute significantly to making the essays hopefully a useful reading also for undergraduates who are considering undertaking fieldwork in Banāras or elsewhere. Solemn moments are not absent from some of the papers either. However, these are rarely moments of undifferentiated praise and they usually have concrete, this-worldly referents: persons, places, and events, or situations resulting from combinations of these elements. Even in the more evocative passages, Banāras (or Kāśī, or Vārāṇasī) is not idealized or glorified as the ancient and eternal place of deliverance, with the contributors contextualizing their reminiscences biographically, socially, historically. With this in mind, the term 'pilgrimage' in the collection's title – chosen initially as a potentially attractive title-theme for a meeting catering to a larger public – sheds much of its religio-spiritual ballast, and the critical undertones in the volume further contribute to its firm grounding.[3]

The construction of the city's sacredness is nevertheless present as a theme in several of the collection's contributions, most conspicuously in the first essay by Travis Smith, who draws attention to what he calls the 'fundamental methodological conundrum' of having to decide between a scholarly and a devotional approach when reading Purāṇic *māhātmya*s ('glorifying texts') of Banāras/Vārāṇasī. This particular genre of texts contains stories from a mythological past that present the city as a place where deities permanently and eternally dwell. They describe, among other things, religiously important sites (a 'sacred geography'), rituals to be performed in particular places, and benefits to be acquired from these devotional acts. For the worshiper (resident or pilgrim), temple owner, and traditional interpreter, the *māhātmya*s constitute the textual foundation of the city's sacredness. The conundrum mentioned by Smith (and quite familiar to many of us working in the study of religions) appears when scholars look at textual histories and 'read between the lines,' analyze the (anonymous) authors' ideological intentions, and establish possible links be-

3 That being said, it should be noted that the combination of the terms 'scholar' and 'pilgrimage' was not entirely uncontroversial among the participants in the conference, and generated a lively discussion in the closing session. And discreet inquiries from potential participants in the run-up to the event asking about the desired tenor of the conference and cautiously warning that their contribution might not be free of critical (under)tones are a telling expression of scholars' awareness of the selective approaches to the topic, as well as of audience expectations.

tween text passages and religious movements' or individual interests in enhancing the popularity of certain sites, thus running counter to the idea of timeless sacredness and revelation stated in the texts and followed by myriads of devotees. Having recognized and acknowledged this – apparently irreconcilable – divergence, Travis Smith points out that the two approaches are complex and fluid in their own ways, and suggests that the boundaries between them might be more permeable than they seem. Two individual perspectives from the second half of the nineteenth century are selected to illustrate this ambiguity when dealing with the *māhātmya* tradition. The first example is the Anglican missionary M. A. Sherring, who spent roughly two decades of his life in Banāras, and his historical study *The Sacred City of the Hindus: An Account of Benares in Ancient and Modern Times* (1868). Though his motivations are multiple, Sherring's is a scholarly work on the city. However, while he (implicitly) acknowledges the mythical nature of the Purāṇic *māhātmya*s and the lack of historical facts therein, he is in line with other British colonial administrators and historians of his time when he exhibits a certain fascination for the reputation and antiquity of Banāras. As a consequence, Sherring's treatment of the city's early history is influenced by the same Purāṇic construction of a continuous sacred tradition reaching far back in time. The second example selected by Smith discusses the experiences of the nineteenth-century Bengali mystic Ramakrishna during a pilgrimage to Banāras, as presented in Swami Saradananda's biography of the saint. Here, too, the perspective and experiences are complex and fluid, ranging from distress at the sight of greed among local Brahmins to ecstatic visionary moments that reaffirm the validity and authority of the hymnic texts extolling the city's sanctity.

The ideas of the uniqueness, centrality, and complexity of Banāras (or, in this case, of a part of it) in relation to the rest of the world are bundled in a passage from a novel composed by the contemporary Hindi writer Kashinath Singh, who metaphorically connects the city's southernmost neighborhood Assī, Banāras, and the world to Pāṇini's Sanskrit grammar, its commentary (*bhāṣya*) and subcommentaries (*ṭīkā*), respectively. As Heinz Werner Wessler shows in his article, in addition to being an allusion to Banāras/Vārāṇasī/Kāśī as a seat of Sanskrit learning (as much as to the 'pretension of brahmanic learnedness'), the reference to Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* evokes the image of a complex and dense, compact and comprehensive system of rules that has to be learned and explained with the help of auxiliary texts, the *raison d'être* of the latter resting in the existence of the former alone. To Kashinath Singh, Assī and Banāras are such dense socio-cultural systems, characterized by 'topophilic' traditionalism, self-centeredness, and perhaps a dose of hubris, but also affected by rapid transformation, political interests, and exposure to outer, 'Western,' trends and influences. Wessler embeds the analysis of central themes in Singh's novel *Kāśī kā Assī* ('Kāśī/Banāras's [neighborhood] Assī') in a discussion of the author's biography, literary influences, and language. As Wessler points out, one major subject in Kashinath Singh's work is the encounter and interaction between the inhabitants of Assī and foreign visitors seeking to acquire knowledge of and/or immerse themselves in traditional Indian culture, and the dilemmas that arise in the process. The story of a

young foreign woman and a traditional brahmin who accepts her as his disciple illustrates this aspect, being one of the narrative strands in *Kāśī kā Assī*.

Mari Korpela undertook a systematic study of foreign travelers who return to Banāras regularly for extended stays. On the basis of more than fifty interviews, in her dissertation she looked at the ways in which such 'bohemian lifestyle migrants' form distinct, liminoid communities of their own in an environment of tightly-knit networks. In her essay in this volume she focuses on the image of the city in the eyes of these 'Western' (i.e. non-Indian), non-academic, pilgrim-like beholders. From this perspective, too, Banāras appears first of all as ancient, 'holy,' 'spiritual,' representing 'authentic India,' both in terms of her religious traditions and of a lifestyle – selectively – perceived as 'natural.' Korpela shows that the dichotomy of the inauthentic modern versus the authentic non-modern (or pre-modern) discussed in theoretical studies of tourism applies rather nicely here: 'authenticity' and 'spirituality' are the dominant frameworks for the meanings that the sojourners attach to their experiences in Banāras. However, the romanticized views are supplemented in the interviews with observations on infrastructural problems encountered on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps even more noteworthy are the potential dangers thought to derive from the very characteristics of the city that were initially perceived as compellingly attractive and articulated in quasi-scientific terms. The beneficial 'energies' and 'vibrations' are believed by these long-term sojourners to be able to amplify and morph into overpoweringly strong sensations, even possibly resulting in a pathological 'Banāras syndrome.'

Remotely similar selective envisionings of a vibrant, shining Banāras have been going on among Hindus on Mauritius, as Mathieu Claveyrolas shows in his contribution. To a part of the island's inhabitants an imagined Banāras constitutes a model of Hindu orthodoxy which they strive to emulate. The conversion of small plantation shrines into larger structures and the replacement of local, aniconic deities' representations with anthropomorphic statues of deities considered 'orthodox' is often backed by the claim of returning to a purer form of religion. Thus the *bīr* Bram Bābā 're-becomes' Brahmā, and the fact that Bram Bābā and other guardian deities enjoy considerable popularity in the very neighborhoods of Banāras itself is simply ignored. The social and religious complexity of Banāras recedes to the background, while the centrality and prominence of the city as an orthodox Hindu sacred place is emphasized. As Claveyrolas points out, this selective, incomplete, biased perception of Banāras can be found not only on Mauritius, but it pervades other discourses too, sometimes including the academic. The author argues therefore for a more nuanced and carefully contextualized treatment of the city's position and popularity in a pan-Indian network of pilgrimage places, and of its (self-) representation as a millennia-old center of Sanskrit culture and stronghold of dharma, showing that claims to centrality and special sacredness, and to universality and specificity at the same time, are a marker not only of Banāras (the importance of which Claveyrolas does not contest), but of other places of major religious significance as well.

And yet, Banāras *is, has to be* special in so many ways, sympathetic potential

readers of the present collection might exclaim. In his numerous publications Rana P. B. Singh has made a strong case for substantiating this assertion. In the essay included in this volume, the author, eminent 'scholarly pilgrim' and long-time resident of Banāras, looks back on important stages of his personal, experiential, ongoing journey towards understanding, interpreting, and explaining this densely 'storied' and intensely alive place, to the study of which he dedicated more than four decades of his life, and to which he feels extremely closely attached in so many ways. Combining personal insight, the rich eulogical literature, and methods from various approaches and disciplines (cultural, physical, and social geography, but also, for example, cultural astronomy and geometry), Rana Singh illustrates with the help of spatial and cognitive maps the complexity of the multi-layered symbolic, geographic, and socio-religious landscape of Banāras. Śiva's trident (on which, according to mythology, the city is built), the riverfront ghāṭs, divisions of time and space, pilgrimage routes, clusters and groups of interconnected shrines and temples, all this is visually represented and connected to a wide range of other aspects in order to demonstrate the 'uniqueness and distinctiveness', but also the 'archetypal' quality of Banāras, a place described as 'full of complexity and contrasts,' and 'difficult to comprehend' for those outside the tradition. In this essay, as in many of his other writings, Rana Singh also seeks to increase awareness for the importance of sustainably preserving such sites that are 'mirror[s] of human growth,' and invites his readers warmly to a 'co-pilgrimage in and around Banāras, [...] on the cosmic circuit in search of revelation and deeper understanding.'

Sojourns and staying to carry out research in the city can indeed have unforeseen consequences for individual – personal and academic – careers, often generating fruitful, far-reaching insights, as evident in many of the essays in this collection. According to Annette Wilke, her experiences during extensive stays in Banāras were instrumental for 'profound changes [...] with regard to both contents and methods' in her later work. This 'turn' in her approach to both theory and method is captured in her essay's title, that aptly shifts the emphasis from the ubiquitous ['spiritual'-] light-imagery firmly rooted in the traditional designation of the city (*Kāśī*, the Shining, the Luminous) to the sensory expressions and material aspects of religions. Of these, the author focused not on the well known and studied pronounced visuality of South Asian culture/religion, but explored instead its 'sonic cosmos': the articulation and sound of what is spoken, recited, sung – orality and sonality in the widest sense of the terms. The essay summarizes the major themes of an ample monograph in which Wilke (with Oliver Moebius as a contributing author) discusses and contextualizes audible realizations and auditive perceptions of Vedic/Sanskrit texts over the centuries, producing an important contribution to a 'sonic cultural history' of the subcontinent, with wide-ranging consequences for the methodology of studying Sanskrit texts and for the theoretical approach of an applied aesthetics of religion. The author's 'Banāras experience' figures prominently in the beginnings of both the monograph and the essay, as the point of departure and reservoir of data. Another, this time historical, reference to Banāras is the example selected to illustrate the

concept of 'sonic worldview,' namely the 'mantra contemplation' of Bhāskararāya, a Maharashtrian Brahmin and seventeenth-century resident of Banāras, practitioner-scholar and commentator of the tantric Śrīvidyā tradition. Wilke concludes her essay with eight persuasive propositions for perspectives on and approaches to the study of Sanskrit Hinduism.

Maharashtrian Sanskrit scholars like Bhāskararāya had been conspicuously present in Banāras since the early sixteenth century, when the first families of Maharashtrian Brahmins migrated from Paithan to the city. Among them was the family of Rameshvara Bhatta, whose son Narayana Bhatta was to become the author of the authoritative work on pilgrimage *Tristhalīsetu* ('The Bridge to the Three [Sacred] Places'). As Irina Glushkova shows in her contribution, the Maharashtrian pandits in Banāras contributed significantly to establishing the practice of pilgrimage to Banāras by their active networks in the region of their origin. From the end of the seventeenth century onwards, Marathas also made their presence felt as major sponsors and builders of temples, palaces and ghāṭs. The movement of Maharashtrians to Banāras was facilitated by the chain of Maratha-ruled territories between Poona and Delhi, and the increasing importance of Banāras (and of the two other cities in the *tristhalī*-chain, Prayag and Gaya) as a pilgrimage destination for various social groups, including members of princely families, turned the city into a politically contested place. In the eighteenth century, the peshwas of the Maratha Confederacy attempted repeatedly to bring the city under their rule. In one of the early Marathi chronicles, Kāśī is even described as situated at the northern border of 'Maharashtra dharma.' While the 'Banāras of the Marathas' dream [...] was not destined to become true,' the city's Maharashtrian history extends forcefully up to the present and reveals itself on various levels. Numerous ghāṭs bear today visibly the names of their Maratha builders (princes, ministers, widows of rulers) and are populated by local Brahmans sitting under the characteristic umbrellas probably introduced by a Maharashtrian Brahmin in the eighteenth century; temple archives and reliefs, figures or inscriptions in temples bear witness to Maharashtrian patronage, and in the part of the city aptly called Kāśī Maharashtra, the author participated in the festival dedicated to Gaṇeśa organized by the city's Maharashtrian community. Glushkova's 'scholarly pilgrimages' to the city and her exploration of its Maratha past through the study of predominantly Marathi-language sources provide a systematic 'alternative view,' thus adding an important chapter to the existing scholarship on the cultural history of Banāras.

Among the prominent examples of the Marathas' lasting architectural legacy are some of the important ghāṭs in Banāras, including a number of impressive adjacent buildings. Ghāṭs, defined by Savitri Jalais in her contribution as 'common architectural device[s] in South Asia [...] at the edge of water bodies and consisting of steps, terraces, and tiers,' have in Banāras a twofold function. In addition to providing access to the river, they were constructed to manage and channel the movement of the Ganges. There are overall around a hundred such ghāṭs at the Banāras riverfront, segments with considerable variations in length and height, many of them popular

gathering places for the inhabitants of and visitors to Banāras. The activities on the ghāṭs include, as is well known, bathing (ritual or otherwise), religious activities, the washing of dishes and clothes, leisure and even sports. In her extensive study of the ghāṭs (in her dissertation) Savitri Jalais combined various perspectives such as the geographical/topographical, socio-cultural (including the religious), historical, and political, aiming 'to understand and analyze the logic behind the formation of this riverfront.' The author undertook detailed cartographic research, studying topographical, urban-layout, hydrological and other maps, and looking at defining factors and elements that have led to the present structures. She measured and drew sections of the riverfront, observing at the same time the life on the ghāṭs and interacting with local people. Jalais describes in her essay how in the course of the many days spent on the ghāṭs a relationship of mutual trust gradually developed, enabling her to use her scales, rulers, and lasers not only unhindered, but enjoying the benevolent support of the locals. As Jalais notes, the formation and development of the Banāras riverfront was influenced in great measure not only by 'symbolic trajectories,' paths leading from the urban milieu, from passages, temples, shrines, and gymnasia (*akhāṛās*) *to* the water, but also by a path *along* the river that forms a part of popular pilgrimage routes. Relatively isolated segments were thus expanded and connected (in order to facilitate, for example, movement to and between the five ghāṭs of major importance, so-called *tīrtha*s, fords or passages between various worlds or levels of the human condition), and the path enlarged due to increasing pilgrimage and other activities over the decades.

Images of the ghāṭs are most likely to sink deep into the memory of those who spend time in Banāras. Vasudha Dalmia introduces her essay with recollections of the ghāṭs and the river, recurring motifs originating in an early childhood visit and revived on subsequent stays. They, together with memories of old, widowed relatives and an urn with ashes, of joyless devotional songs, lone sadhus on the silent, timeless river, and the impressive evening ritual at the Viśvanāth temple, evoke the composite image of a city associated with 'death, solemnity, filth, and holy grandeur.' The author describes how she first encountered the work of Bharatendu Harishchandra, 'the young merchant prince of late nineteenth-century Banāras,' incorporating a chapter on Harishchandra and his attempts to introduce performance culture to North Indian stages in her dissertation on contemporary drama. Some years later she returned to Banāras, having recognized that the figure and work of Harishchandra were pivotal for understanding the complex processes leading to the formation in the second half of the nineteenth-century of a Hinduism that was traditionalist and modern, exclusive and expansive at the same time. Vasudha Dalmia includes in her essay glimpses of research conducted in the archives and libraries of the city, encounters with erudite, dedicated, and supportive scholars, and the ways in which 'Banāras grew on [her] as [she] began to view it through Harishchandra's eyes.' Following the completion of this project and the subsequent move to a new academic environment, her studies led the author again to Banāras, this time to work on novels written by Premchand in the opening decades of the twentieth century. With some of their central themes,

Premchand's Banāras novels *Sevāsadan* and *Karmabhūmi* 'literally stormed the citadel that was the holy city of Kāśī,' with critique directed against the institution of marriage fixated on caste and dowry, or with the unambiguous positioning in favor of the city's Dalits (who finally succeed in entering a temple from which they were previously barred) and working poor. The time spent in Banāras in connection with the work on Premchand's novels included readings on the city and its culture in those decades, walks through the Banārsī neighborhoods in which the novels were set, and peaceful days of writing in a hospitable guesthouse on the river. The final passages of the essay are reflections on the personal impact of the author's Banāras-related work. Vasudha Dalmia writes about how the exploration of the many layers in the city's cultural history contributed to a better understanding of 'what went into the making of [her own] world.' And there is another remarkable sentence here in which the author sums up her motivation to return to Banāras, a veritable leitmotif to all 'scholarly pilgrims': 'This combination, of being an insider as well as an outsider, of understanding and not understanding, has taken me back to the city again and again.'

Contributors to this volume have often included warm words of gratitude to individuals connected to Banāras whose guidance, advice, and support were instrumental for the successful outcome of their research projects. The title of the essay by Hillary Rodrigues refers to some of the – frequently overlapping – relationships between the researcher and the people they come into contact with before going to or while being 'in the field' in different stages of their work. The figures of the author's 'teachers, friends, and helpers,' 'guides to Śiva's beloveds,' are embedded in a narrative that extends from his first encounter with Banāras and the following extensive research work on goddess worship conducted in the city to more recent or 'ongoing scholarly pilgrimages.' Rodrigues begins this story with vivid descriptions of his impressions on arriving for the first time in the narrow lanes of inner-city Banāras as a young, low-budget traveler on a year-long trip through Asia, spending his first night in the city at the cremation ghāṭ, and visiting the next day the temple of Durgā, the deity that would become the main focus of his research. Atmospheric accounts of episodes and encounters from the eventful doctoral fieldwork conducted more than a decade later take the reader in a procession to Lāṭ Bhairava's marriage at Kapālamocana tank, on an auto-rickshaw journey to Chunar and Vindhyachal, to the daily and seasonal rites at the Durgā temple, and to the musical performances at the annual temple festival. During the year spent in the city, the author documented elaborate temple and domestic rituals dedicated to the goddess, glimpses of which are given to the essay's readers, and he read relevant liturgical texts. The study of the texts and the work on the ritual worship of the Devī took Rodrigues back to the city many times in later years, too. While the author's numerous other projects and publications are not directly connected to Banāras, 'that remarkable city was the trunk from which these branches sprouted,' he writes towards the end of his narrative essay that has features of a veritable *Bildungsroman*, being at the same time an homage to its setting, Banāras, and to its numerous, affectionately remembered, supporting characters.

Persuasive arguments for the combination of textual studies and fieldwork in the study of religious traditions in Banāras are put forward in Xenia Zeiler's contribution in which the author presents her ethno-indological approach in two major research projects. The first project dealt with the Vīreśvara/Ātmavīreśvar temple, mentioned already in the authoritative fourteenth-century *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*. With the help of detailed textual and extensive ethnological studies, by comparing present-day ritual practices with the instructions given in an early text on this temple, changes in these practices became evident, leading to a more general discussion of *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* ('as told in the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*') traditions. In her second project, Zeiler looked at the traditions connected to the goddess Dhūmāvatī and the transformations in the representation of this deity. While in early references in texts such as the eleventh-century *Śāradātilakatantra* and the *Phetkāriṇītantra* (fourteenth–sixteenth century) the goddess is described as dangerous and terrifying and forms part of the Tantric ritual system, in the nineteenth-century *Mantramahārṇava* and *Śāktapramoda* the first tendencies pointing towards the integration of Dhumāvatī into a pan-Hindu orthopraxy become visible. In this case, too, the author conducted extensive fieldwork (for almost two years) studying the lived tradition, collecting data on all major activities of the temple, participating in festivals, and interviewing a large number of devotees in addition to all the ritual specialists of the temple. Zeiler's indebtedness to the latter is gratefully acknowledged, and is another example of the openness and the supportive, genuine interest that researchers are regularly met with by Banārsī individuals and institutions. In the concluding part of her article, the author looks at the mediatization of religious traditions in Banāras, proposing to expand the ethno-indological approach by adding to the study of textual sources and contemporary practices the examination of their (re-)interpretation in modern mass media.

Modern media play a major role in the work of Marc J. Katz, whose essay on 'turning-the-corner discoveries' in Banāras contains references to the documentary films he produced on the elaborate celebrations of Holī and Muharram in the city. The author's experience of Holī, the spring festival of colors, began many years before the making of the film. Over the years, and after many instances of festive color play, the fascination for the connected ritual events of a multi-faceted festival season, with preparatory sequences and processions starting about a month before the main ritual event, the Holikā fire, materialized in a long-term research project. The essay describes ritual events taking place five days before the well-known play with colors, on the day of Raṅgbarī Ekādaśī, the Colorful Eleventh, when 'each and every temple image, each and every liṅga, each and every aspect of divinity, both male and female, receives a spattering of red color,' including the waters of Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ and the main deity of the city, Viśvanāth. In the course of the work on another major project, focusing this time on the Banāras Muharram, the author came across a ritual commemorating a Hindu potter joining in the Muharram celebrations two hundred years ago. Every year, the *kumbhār kā taziya*, a model shrine in the shape of a Hindu temple, is established at the site called the Potter's Imambara, which then becomes a gathering place not only for members of the local Muslim community but also

for Hindu men and women. A third 'moment of discovery' described in the essay occurred in connection with the exploration of the yearly dramatization of Rāma's story, the Rāmlīlā. Here, Katz looked into the history and mythology of a low-caste group of regular active participants who identified themselves as *ādivāsī*s (tribals). These and many other topics explored by the author during his numerous stays in Banāras over a time span of more than four decades illustrate the colorful cultural mosaic of the city as well as the distinct character of its different neighborhoods. Systematic fieldwork in these *mohallā*s leads to the challenging of perceptions acquired in the classroom and in libraries by students in South Asian studies, providing the 'sorely needed tangible contact' with lived traditions, writes the author. And the most likely outcome of such work includes continuous new 'revelations,' 'moments of awakening,' and the realization that 'there can exist no definitive description of Banāras.'

Banāras doubtlessly has the capacity to arouse a wide range of (often contradictory *and* simultaneous) sensations and emotions. Reinhold Schein presents in his contribution two Austrian writers whose literary works reflect their experiences in the city. During a trip to India and South-East Asia in 1908/9, Stefan Zweig visited Banāras and wrote an account of his impressions and observations, published in March 1909 in a Viennese newspaper. Zweig's article goes beyond being a mere travelogue, as he uses the descriptions of the inhabitants' daily life and religious practices as departure points for reflections of a more general nature. The writer's experiences in the encounter with Banāras (and India) are ambivalent. Reinhold Schein points out that Zweig is deeply impressed by the dedication with which the city's inhabitants and the pilgrims perform their religious activities. To Zweig, however, this fervor is an explanation for and an expression of a fatalistic attitude both with regard to submitting to foreign powers and the constraints imposed by the caste system. The writer is empathetic and anxious to understand the religious and social way of life in Banāras. At the same time, he cannot avoid certain misconceptions such as, for example, interpreting yogic practices as expressions of atonement for sins committed by the practitioner. Influences of Zweig's experiences in Banāras and India can be found in a number of his later writings as well, especially in his *Die Augen des ewigen Bruders* ('The Eyes of the Eternal Brother'), which Reinhold Schein discusses in some detail. The second Austrian writer introduced in the essay is Josef Winkler. His extended visits to Banāras resulted in the book *Domra: Am Ufer des Ganges* ('Domra: On the Banks of the Ganges'), a work described best as a diary-cum-travelogue. The focus of the book lies on the everyday activities at and around one of the city's cremation ghāṭs, where Winkler spent several hours a day for a number of months, 'fascinated by the contrast between the rituals of death and cremation and the sprawling life that unfolded itself at the same time just next to the funeral pyres.' In long passages abounding with attributive adjectives the narrator describes minutely the process of transformation of corpses into ashes, the work of the low-caste specialists in charge of the cremation, the playing and bathing children, the animals on the ghāṭ. The extremely detailed, comment-less descriptions of Banārsi ghāṭ and street life contain many scenes that are potentially repulsive to

the reader. In interviews Winkler emphasized that the precision and beauty of the language were paramount, while the common categories of beauty and ugliness did not matter to him. In the concluding part of his remarks on Winkler's book, Reinhold Schein points out that it makes the reader feel 'the close proximity of life and death as an indivisible totality,' even if, in the end, one 'remains puzzled by the scenes and rituals described.'

The 'Banāras experience' can be deeply transformative and often on various levels, as shown by Nita Kumar in the reflections on her 'academic pilgrimages' to the city. Her essay takes us through interconnected 'lessons' ('anger,' 'pain,' 'imagination,' and 'love') learnt over more than three decades of intense and complex involvement with the place, lessons that are the 'fruits of that pilgrimage.' The section titled 'Anger' is about personal histories of Banārsī artisans and their descendants, about backwardness, knowledge, and modernity, about educational reforms and frustrations with their failure and its consequences, and about practical action. In 'Pain,' Nita Kumar reflects on her experiences and challenges resulting from the observation of teacher–child interaction in hundreds of classrooms in connection with education research she conducted in Banāras. Major problem areas that became obvious in the process were the poor motivation and other shortcomings of the educators, inappropriate space, and the 'school–home divide,' where 'the vast resources of techniques, narratives, symbols, systems that exist in children's home lives are not imaginatively used by educators.' Included in this section is a condensed and impressive account of the author's emotional responses and stages in the course of decade-long research projects in Banāras. 'Imagination' contains a brief outline of the economic and cultural history of the city, reflections on the historically plural location of education (school and home/neighborhood), and an emphasis on the affirmation of this plurality as an empowering element in the schooling of children today. Towards the end of the last section ('Love'), in which Nita Kumar concludes both a historical and a deeply personal narrative on education, research, and her multiple and intertwined perspectives on Banāras as an educator and a historian/anthropologist, she writes about how she moved from loving 'her' artisans, from being 'genuinely fond' of them and having 'high regard for their qualities' to 'the love that cares enough to probe further as to what they actually are in the many dimensions of their identities and what they want to become. And the love that then dares to interact and interfere [...].'

From personal histories of Banārsī artisans and their families to the stories of 'commission boys' on the city's ghāṭs: Mikael Aktor discusses in his essay the 'informative relationships' he engaged in with tourist guides during fieldwork in Banāras. Western visitors to the city who are approached by these young men and are offered information and help, enter – by accepting the offer – into longer-lasting relationships with them, becoming thus part of the guides' larger network of friends and relatives. These relationship networks usually include 'holy men, gurus, and gods,' too. The essay offers insights into the ways in which such networks function in a specific social context often characterized by economic uncertainty. After having met two young guides during his first trip to Banāras, Aktor asked for their help two years lat-

er when he returned to the city for fieldwork. The theme of his research project was the iconography of and the rituals connected to the Śiva liṅga. The brahmin friend of one of the guides was called upon to help with the correct performance of the ritual, who then invited the author to spend the time of the *navarātrī* festival in the young brahmin's native village. There, in addition to observing the performance of rituals, Mikael Aktor interacted with his host's friends, was asked for financial advice, and joined his host's NGO. Back in Banāras, the author learned about his guide-friends' financial and personal problems, and was then introduced to an aged Swami widely admired for his ascetic lifestyle and spiritual guidance. At the Swami's residence he witnessed the distribution of free food to the poor, stemming from donations to the Swami's ashram. Reflecting on the various relationships he engaged in during his fieldwork, Aktor highlights not only the centrality of close networks on which many people in Banāras and in India are dependent, but also the importance of co-opting religious actors ('holy men and gods') in such networks, who then act in many ways as dynamic forces, transforming 'each person in such a voluntary network [...] [into] one of God's many [helping] hands.'

In a related context of extending help to individuals or communities, Paul Younger evokes in his contribution the work he did for the Bhoodan (*bhūdān*) or Land Gift Movement in the village of Chittapur, near the Banāras Hindu University (BHU) campus. Younger came to India in 1957 as part of the International Studies Program, enrolling in the BHU. After a brief account of the history leading to his decision to travel to India and his choice of Banāras, the author describes his early experiences at the university, the memorable encounters and interactions with co-students, scholars visiting the university and its International House (Bharati, Panikkar, Scrima, Staal, Potter and others), and teachers at the BHU (among them, Raj Bali Pandey, V. S. Agrawala, V. S. Pathak, A. K. Narain, T. R. V. Murti). The accounts include reflections on the British legacy discernible in the 1950s in what the author calls 'the tail end of the missionary era in Banāras,' but also in the structure and scholarly style of the university. Further examples of that legacy are the setting and the turbaned servers at a Delhi garden party at which Prime Minister Nehru and Vice President Radhakrishnan were present, and the student protests 'structured like a Gandhian fast' and entangled in local politics and conflicts typical of the last decades of British rule. Moving into a student residence, the author became acquainted with those parts and aspects of the city his fellow Indian students knew best: not the ghāṭs or well-known temples (such as the Viśvanāth), but places like 'the Bengali widow houses, the famous Banāras hospices nearby, and the hangouts of various male and female ascetics.' It was also a student colleague who took Younger to Chittapur, more precisely to the residential area of the low-caste *camārs*, or leather workers. Sometime later he was asked by the leader of the Bhoodan movement to assist the villagers in implementing the movement's plans. After finishing his exams, Younger moved to the village and helped build a culvert, earning the love and respect of Chittapur's *camār* community. The part of the essay dealing with the author's stay and work in Chittapur offers insights into local social and religious structures. After his early ex-

periences in the late 1950s the author returned frequently to Banāras, feeling always 'like coming home.' He guided and supervised students who conducted fieldwork on various aspects of Banāras, and who became scholars and teachers themselves. For them, as for many of us others, 'Banāras turned out to be a golden opportunity, but we never learned exactly what we thought we would.' The city, writes Younger, 'welcomes [her] adopted children with as much warmth as if they were her own, but [...] one has to be prepared to let her make a place for you where she will.'

And she did make a place for me, too. Following a first, almost year-long, fruitful stay in the mid-1990s, I have been a regular visitor to the city for the last nearly twenty years now. My essay is an attempt to recollect preliminaries and circumstances of the trip to Banāras, and to look back to the early period of that first stay, relying mainly on field notes taken during that time. As a student spending an academic year abroad, one of my main objectives was language study, the other being to observe and experience as broadly as possible aspects of the thriving cultural activities in Banāras, with a focus on religion. The notes from the first weeks spent in the city included the stages of my settling in, as well as the gradual emergence of a more clearly contoured research project. After a series of serendipitous encounters and events, the worship of the extremely popular simian deity Hanumān became the main theme of my research in Banāras for several years to come. Touching on issues concerning research methodology, the essay contains some reflections on the extent to which records of such composite nature, a combination of data and diary, of descriptive and impressionistic vignettes, could/should have been used more systematically in the scholarly texts resulting from my stay, contributing thus to a more explicit thematization of the researcher's positionality and situatedness. Re-reading notes and recollecting early and later fieldwork experiences in the city also led to attempts at assessing the formativity of these stays, on both a personal and academic level, raising questions that need (and will hopefully receive) more thorough attention. The field notes did confirm, however, a fact that cannot be prized highly enough, and without which neither considerable parts of my work nor this collection in its present form would have been possible: In those early weeks as well as later I benefited immensely from the support of Banārsīs who readily and generously shared their thoughts and experiences with me, and who helped me navigate and comprehend – at least to a certain degree – a fascinating world of which I feel I have become a part.

As mentioned previously, the essays in this volume emerged from a conference organized at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim. I am grateful to NTNU's Rector's Office, the Organizing Committee of 'India 2011,' and the Faculty of Humanities for the generous funding of the event, and to the Faculty and the Department of Archaeology and Religious Studies for financially supporting the publication of the volume. I would like to thank Peter Williams warmly for his efficient language editing. Finally, my thanks go to Axel Michaels for including the collection in Harassowitz's Ethno-Indology series, of which he is the general editor.

Vārāṇasī Envisioned: Approaches to the Purāṇic Māhātmyas

Travis L. Smith

This essay emerges from thoughts about my extended engagement with Vārāṇasī, and with the textual tradition that has been most instrumental in constructing her sacredness, the Vārāṇasī *māhātmya* tradition of the Sanskrit Purāṇas. My goal here is to address a fundamental question of perspective in my own scholarly approach to these texts: whether a critical text-historical study necessarily runs counter to a normative view that holds the *māhātmya*s to be divinely revealed, and the city to be sacred. In other words, I ask the question: can one be a scholar and devotee of the city at the same time?

Vārāṇasī[1] may well be the most famous and revered place of pilgrimage for Hindus in the world, and it has been praised time and again as not merely a holy place, but an eternal source of transcendent experience and salvific knowledge. The textual sources most responsible for establishing Vārāṇasī as sacred are a range of works in Sanskrit known as *māhātmya*s – 'glorifications.' Found scattered throughout the vast corpus of the Sanskrit Purāṇas, these *māhātmya*s collectively comprise a 'tradition' that represents the authoritative scriptural presentation of Vārāṇasī as a sacred place. Through grandiose descriptions of its many sacred locales and effusive accounts of the worldly and other-worldly benefits derived from performing sanctioned devotions within the city's hallowed grounds, the *māhātmya*s present Vārāṇasī as not just a premier pilgrimage destination, but as an eternal abode of the divine. This is established through grand proclamations and authoritative statements, but also – and perhaps especially – through the telling of stories. Typical of Purāṇa texts, *māhātmya*s teach and preach through narrative, recounting tales of bygone cosmic eras; tales that continue to animate and empower the place for all time. If we are to understand how and in what way Vārāṇasī is considered to be a sacred place, then the *māhātmya* tradition is an indispensable resource. Cited by temple proprietors and pilgrims alike, the *māhātmya*s are at the core of the construction of Vārāṇasī's sacred image.

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1 A brief note on usage: For the sake of convenience, I use here 'Vārāṇasī,' the current official name of the city. Colonial and contemporary writers have generally used the more colloquial 'Banāras' (often anglicized as 'Benares'). The city is also alternatively known as 'Kāśī' (as it is in the title of the *māhātmya*, the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*); but this usage is not attested before the seventh century CE or thereabouts. Somewhat confusingly, however, it is drawn from 'Kāśi,' which was the name of both the territory (not the city proper) and the peoples which occupied it, as referred to in ancient literature. For additional details, see Dubey 1993).

As essential as they are for the study of Vārāṇasī history, however, the *māhātmya*s are curiously elusive in yielding answers to even the most basic historical questions we ask of them, such as, who composed them, when, and with what general motivations. Technically authorless, the *māhātmya*s, like the Purāṇa genre to which they belong, are part divine revelation and part human composition. Though they consist of conversations between gods and sages in remote cosmic eras, the tradition also recognizes that the earthly version of this revelation diverges from the original and fluctuates in the human realm, adapting to the needs of different times and places (Coburn 1980: 345–6). In sorting through the tortuous strands of manuscript transmission of these texts, it is immediately apparent that the Purāṇas are an extraordinarily messy canon: texts are frequently and liberally edited over time by hands that clearly belonged more to ambitious redactors than to faithful scribes. And while no Purāṇa text is anywhere 'signed' by a human author, making it difficult to pinpoint the texts in space and time, I have argued that the texts frequently show awareness of, and provide justification for, the fact that they are uniquely 'editable' (Smith forthc.).

Purāṇa literally means 'ancient lore,' but despite their concern with the past, these texts are far from chronicled history in the modern sense of the term, and far even from other narrative genres of South Asia that have been more amenable to modern understandings of 'history.'[2] Within the still-fraught debate of whether or not premodern India was possessed of 'historical consciousness,' Purāṇas have rarely entered the discussion.[3] And rightfully so: if the criteria for historical writing include historically verifiable events and figures, Purāṇas contain few of either, and where they occur, they are generally obscured – often deliberately so – by the vast sweep of the Purāṇic temporal perspective, where time is measured in cosmic world-cycles and not human years. Most of the events of Purāṇic narratives are set in the remote, presumably pre-historical, or perhaps supra-historical past of bygone ages. Scholars have therefore been more or less unanimous in describing these texts as 'mythological,' though sometimes allowing, or hoping, that an occasional nugget of 'real history' might be preserved amid the dross of fantasy and legend.

In engaging these texts, I have striven to avoid the positivist separation of false myth and real history. As Daud Ali suggests, 'the aim of the critic is not to distinguish 'real' history writing from counterfeit, but to appreciate the variety of discourses about the past [and] to understand the ontological assumptions, narrative structuring, temporal frames and conditions of production of different types of writing about the past' (Ali 2013: 239). For the Purāṇas there is certainly much more at stake than the simple recording or recalling of events, and one of my primary goals as a critic of

2 I am thinking here of genres ranging from early narrative genres of the *ākhyākikā* and the *kathā*, to the later Jain *prabandha* literature and Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅginī*, which represent a shift in style and attitudes toward the past. On the latter see the recent volume edited by Whitney Cox (2013).

3 The literature on this subject is considerable. For a recent discussion, see Shulman and Rao 2011.

these texts has indeed been to understand the particular Purāṇic engagement with the past.

If appreciating the Purāṇic past in its own light were my sole goal as a critic, I could indeed follow Ali's call to sidestep the need to judge between real and counterfeit in examining the Purāṇic narratives. But though I do attempt to appreciate the Purāṇas and understand their internal worldview in my evaluation of these texts, I also utilize them for my own – more positivistic, perhaps – purposes. Indeed, the Purāṇic *māhātmya*s of Vārāṇasī are themselves some of the most crucial sources for Vārāṇasī history that are available to us; and by 'history' here, I mean it in the sense of externally verifiable events and actors, including the authors and redactors of the texts themselves. The *māhātmya*s do not report history per se, but they certainly have influenced it; and I see no reason to doubt that they were composed, redacted and utilized with very particular political and ideological aims in mind, embedded in their respective socio-historical contexts.

But to read the texts this way is, to some extent, to read past, if not directly counter to, the pronouncements of the texts themselves, and seek to creatively interpret the narratives in terms of historical figures, groups and events. While Purāṇic discourse is deliberately supra-historical, it is, at the same time, demonstrably rife with concern for social, political and theological agendas, which can often give us insight into the ideological perspectives of their human composers and redactors. Once again, the Purāṇic *māhātmya*s are among the relatively few sources that we have available for the study of premodern Vārāṇasī history; in order to utilize them for this end, however, the scholar must 'read between the lines' of the narratives themselves. In emphasizing the *māhātmya*s' construction of sacred Vārāṇasī, and examining how they shape and reshape it from text to text in differing historical circumstances, I have already positioned myself, to some extent, outside of the texts.

From a scholarly standpoint, there is no problem with dissecting the textual histories of the *māhātmya*s, linking texts to historical sectarian groups, and seeing the compositional strategies used by the authors to forward their own sectarian views, or to promote particular temples and the like. But this scholarly approach, fruitful though it has been, has repeatedly thrown up a rather fundamental methodological conundrum. At some point, we must face frankly the issue that the scholarly approach directly contradicts the statements of the texts, and thus the faith of countless devotees. The choice seems unavoidable: either we take the devotional approach and accept Vārāṇasī as truly, ultimately sacred and the texts as revealed, or we take the scholarly approach and show that this sacredness is contingent, varied and ultimately constructed; and perhaps even 'imaginary,' depending on the value we assign to this potentially provocative term.

I propose here to acknowledge the divergence between the two positions: they are, indeed, not reconcilable in terms of their respective truth claims. As Thomas Coburn phrases it in a now-classic essay (1980: 352) about the interpretation of the Purāṇas: 'While critical inquiry is not intrinsically antipathetic to the concerns of faith, the point at which the former begins to encroach upon the latter may vary…'

We must admit, at the outset, that text-historical study does not 'live' in the same space as the supra-historical time of the Purāṇic *māhātmya* tradition.

Once this dichotomy is straightforwardly recognized, however, it may open up further possibilities to think through its implications, rather than shut down potential avenues of nuanced understanding. I suggest here that, while the dichotomy is real, the boundaries between the scholarly and the devotional are much more fluid and permeable than might immediately be apparent. In order to show this, I wish to examine two classical individual 'approaches' to Vārāṇasī, each rather foundational in its own way. Both examples date from the transformative 19th-century colonial era – in fact, they happen to date from the same year, 1868 – where, as one scholar has phrased it, Vārāṇasī was 'at the crossroads' of tradition and modernity (Medhasananda 2003). In briefly examining these two examples, I hope to show that both the scholarly and the devotional approaches are more complex and fluid than they might appear, and that they even converge in surprising ways.

M. A. Sherring's 'Sacred City of the Hindus'

The Reverend Matthew Atmore Sherring certainly thought that the mythic and the historical were completely irreconcilable perspectives. A senior Anglican missionary in Vārāṇasī, Sherring authored the very first modern critical study of Vārāṇasī: *The Sacred City of the Hindus: an Account of Benares in Ancient and Modern Times* (1868).[4] A long-time resident of the city, Sherring lived in Vārāṇasī for much of his adult life, passing away there 1880. Sherring's view of the city betrays the mixture of fascination and disgust one would expect from a missionary working in what was considered the most thoroughly Hindu of cities.[5] Sherring's work spawned something of a cottage industry for historical/traveler's accounts of the city, and also laid the foundation for future, more dedicated historical studies of Vārāṇasī.[6]

4 For a brief overview of Sherring's life and works, see Katherine Prior, 'Sherring, Matthew Atmore (1826–1880).' In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed., edited by Lawrence Goldman. Oxford: OUP. http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25387 (accessed June 8, 2013).

5 For an overview of early Western impressions of the city, see Eck 1999: 17–19.

6 Later accounts of Vārāṇasī, such as those of later accounts of John Murdoch (1894), E.B. Havell (1903), Edwin Greaves (1909) and Charles Cape (1910) essentially followed the pattern of Sherring's work, presenting a historical sketch followed by observations on the current makeup of the city. None of these later studies matched the thoroughness and comprehensive character of Sherring's, and most generally acknowledge their indebtedness to their worthy predecessor. Greaves, for example, affirms that Sherring's work 'is still the best book on the subject, though unfortunately it has been out of print for many years, and it is very difficult to procure even a second-hand copy,' adding that his own work is still useful in presenting a fresh account, as much had changed in the intervening 40-plus years since Sherring's work was published (Greaves 1909: i). In several places, he refers the reader to 'Mr. Sherring' for fuller discussions of particular subjects. See, for instance Greaves 1909: 57, 73. Among dedicated historical studies, the earliest is that of Altekar (1937), which was later followed by the much more comprehensive study of Motichandra (1985), which re-

In developing the 'ancient' side of his work on Vārāṇasī, Sherring would have had to make use of the *māhātmya*s. He did so, however, only with great – and undisguised – skepticism. The problem, of course, was that the Purāṇic accounts were simply not reliable for his purposes: the mythical Vārāṇasī would intrude at every turn in his historical researches. The Purāṇic *māhātmya*s were primarily 'religious' in nature and only historical in the loosest of senses: they did more fantastic tale-spinning than chronicling. Sherring wrote of this issue generally, but seemed to have these texts in mind:

> [...] Unfortunately, Hindu writers have shown a singular neglect of chronology, and an utter distaste for noting and recording historical facts in a simple and consecutive manner. [...] Legendary stories are so intermingled with real events, and the web of the one is so intimately inwoven with the woof of the other, and the two form so homogeneous a whole, that the finest microscopic intellects of Europe, after patient and long-continued examination, have been well-nigh baffled in the attempt to discover which is fiction and which is fact. A few threads of truth have rewarded their pains, and perhaps a few others may occasionally be drawn forth; but that the gaudy-coloured fabric of Hindu history, manufactured by themselves, will ever be satisfactorily separated into its two component parts, is as hopeless as to expect that the waters of the Jumna will ever cease to mingle with the waters of the Ganges. (Sherring 1868: 3–4)

Sherring's rather poetic dismissal here of the lack of India's historical consciousness follows a well-worn path of Western thinking about India that, as has been mentioned, still continues to be debated and reconsidered. He, of course, came to the city not as a pilgrim, but as nearly the opposite: a missionary. His aim was to bring the light of Christian gospel and European modernism to a benighted people, ushering in 'a new era of enlightenment' which, as he confidently affirmed in 1868 (p. vi), 'has already dawned upon the land.' So while he was toiling to study the city's past, Sherring, all the while, had his gaze fixed ever forward, on Vārāṇasī's future as a modern city permeated with the light of Christian progress.

But as he focused his missionary efforts on reforming the 'modern' city of his own time, Sherring also made a great deal of progress in reconstructing the history of 'ancient' Vārāṇasī. The assertion in the *māhātmya*s, and seemingly affirmed with observation, was that Vārāṇasī was an ancient city, and indeed Sherring seemed to encounter the ancient past in the city at every turn. Though there were (and are) few standing structures that could be dated earlier than the seventeenth century, Sherring reports on fragments of temples, statues and inscriptions that stretched back a great deal further in time. Despite the carnage of a handful of violent temple destruction campaigns under various rulers spanning the twelfth and seventeenth centuries,

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mains the most authoritative treatment, particularly for the premodern period. Also worthy of mention is the more focused, but wonderfully thorough overview of the medieval religious history of the city of Hans Bakker, found in the introduction to the critical edition of the *Vārāṇasī-māhātmya* portion of the early *Skandapurāṇa* (Bakker and Isaacson 2004).

Sherring discovered tantalizing evidence of some much earlier layers of architecture in certain areas of the old city. Sherring remarks with evident wonder on these and other signs of the remote past, and embarks intermittently on reconstructing, with this evidence, the illustrious past of the great city. And for all his scholarly sobriety and haughty religious disdain, the tone of fascination – might it even be reverence? – is not difficult to detect. He writes of Vārāṇasī:

> It is, indisputably, a place of great antiquity, and may even date to from the time when the Aryan race first spread itself over Northern India. Although such a supposition is incapable of direct proof, yet the sacred city must, undoubtedly, be reckoned amongst the primitive [i.e., first] cities founded by this people. When it was first built, and by what prince or patriarch, is altogether unknown. But of its great antiquity, stretching back through the dim ages of early Indian history, far into the clouds and mists of the Vedic and pre-historical periods, there is no question. (1868: 1)

The history of Vārāṇasī plotted out relatively neatly for Sherring, and it is no surprise that it corresponded to the broader narrative of Indian history articulated by the Orientalist scholars who preceded him.[7] In short, there was an ancient Vedic era of romanticized 'Aryan' religiosity, characterized by the Vedic fire sacrifice. This was interrupted for a few centuries of Buddhist pre-eminence, after which the brahmanical tradition responded to the Buddhist critique with the rise of 'idol worship' and the great gods of Hinduism proper, whose cults would spread through the medium of the emergent Purāṇas. This period would abruptly end in the thirteenth century, when imperial Islam arrived, with Muslim rule in Vārāṇasī being characterized by intolerance, temple destruction and religious persecution. The prominent temples of the city were destroyed in campaigns of Muslim zealotry, and were often replaced with mosques. On the Hindu side, this corresponded with the nefarious rise of self-serving 'priestcraft,' which spurred the popularity of superstitious and magical beliefs canonized in the scriptures of Tantrism. On the other hand it incited a socially conscious reform movement based in vernacular *bhakti* devotionalism, which in Vārāṇasī spawned popular figures such as Tulsīdās and Kabīr. On the whole, however, Indian culture was widely held to have been in a tailspin of decadent decline by the time the British arrived; these new sovereigns, it was expected, would usher in a new, modern era holding the promise of social progress, industrialization and Christian salvation.

Therefore, however awed by the 'clouds and mists' of Vārāṇasī's antiquity Sherring was, it was in the future, not the past, that he saw hope. He was quick to temper any reverential feeling for the past glories of Vārāṇasī with biting – indeed, damning – criticism of the entire culture:

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7 Essentially, the model follows, with some additional nuance, the original periodization of James Mill, whose landmark 1817 *History of British India* divided India's history into three periods, the ancient (Hindu), medieval (Muslim) and modern (British). His larger argument held that Indian society had remained relatively stagnant and unchanging since its inception – the ancient coming of the Aryan race to the subcontinent – and had failed to develop the qualities of rationalism and individualism. See, for example, Thapar 1968.

> [J]ust as we do not admire a man who is a hundred years old, unless he has lived a life of integrity and uprightness [...] we must withhold our admiration from a city or nation which [...] has drawn out an existence of wondrous length, but [...] in respect of those higher qualities which mainly distinguish man from brute [...], has, for many ages, been in a stagnant and unprogressive condition. (1868: 343)

It is apparent that, in critiquing Vārāṇasī, Sherring means to critique all of India, for 'Benares represents India, religiously and intellectually, just as Paris represents the political sentiments of France' (1868: 341–2). He also asserts,

> It is certain that the city is regarded, by all Hindus, as coeval with the birth of Hinduism [...]. By reason of some subtle and mysterious charm, it has linked itself with the religious sympathies of the Hindus through every century of its existence. (1868: 1)

Vārāṇasī here is held up as the representative symbol of all of Hinduism, which itself was representative of India, Islam having been deemed a foreign imposition on the 'real' India.[8] This view is not at all unique to Sherring, but he follows a very strong trend. As Vasudha Dalmia (1999: 54–55) explains, 'Kāśī's reputation as a religious centre [...] acquired a multi-dimensional authority with British administrators, travelers and historians, who initiated the development of a parallel western tradition of the significance of Kāśī.' Perhaps the most important way in which Vārāṇasī was deemed significant was its status as an iconically 'Indian' city.

Sherring's insistence on looking upon Vārāṇasī as primordially Hindu had precedents in British colonial thinking. In the 19th century, Vārāṇasī was a crucial nexus of colonial interactions: it was one of the prominent sites where the very articulation of Hinduism itself was contested, formed and re-formed. Countless pivotal events in the formation of Hinduism took place in Vārāṇasī during this period: from the founding of the Benares Sanskrit College, to the well-publicized debates of Ārya Samāj founder Dayānanda Sarasvatī with local *paṇḍit*s, to the very creation of the Hindī language.[9] The British lavished an extraordinary degree of attention upon Vārāṇasī. In terms of sheer population, it was one of the largest Indian cities during much of the colonial era, even without calculating the steady crush of pilgrim traffic.[10] It was never an administrative center for the Company in the mold of Calcutta, Madras or Delhi; indeed, while these great Indian cities of India were in large part built by the British, Vārāṇasī was, of course, a thriving city long before the British

8 Writing some decades after Sherring, Edwin Greaves acknowledged that the city's population was then as much as 25% Muslim. But insisting on Vārāṇasī's character as a Hindu stronghold, he added that 'here is nothing peculiarly characteristic about the Mahommedans [...] which indicates they are likely to alter the religious life of the city, or of India' (Greaves 1909: 97).

9 Dalmia 1996 and 1999. On the creation of Hindī, see King 1992.

10 Vārāṇasī was one of the most populous cities in India in during much of the colonial period, when it was one of only a handful of cities that boasted a population of over 100,000. According to the 1871 census, it was the fifth most populous city, following only Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Lucknow. See Singh and Rana 2002: 28; Waterfield 1875: 12.

arrived. The city was therefore marked early on as being distinctively 'Indian,' and more particularly, despite a substantial Muslim population, Hindu.

For Sherring and the British, Vārāṇasī was also 'typically Indian' in that it was also a crowded, stinking, disease-infested mess. The population density was considered quite absurd for that era, and when combined with the fact that the city boasted a large number of lakes, ponds, rivulets and bathing tanks – mentioned in the Purāṇas as sacred sites – the propensity for disease and epidemic was great. Indeed, there are several reports of epidemics occurring throughout the colonial period, a matter of some concern for the local colonial administrators (Medhasananda 2003: 455). The unsanitary conditions prompted the undertaking, in the 1820s, of one of the most dramatic public works projects ever attempted in the city: a complex drainage system featuring the construction of a vast underground drain known as the Matsyodarī Tunnel, an architectural marvel of the time.[11]

This grand project may indeed have improved the living conditions for residents in this rapidly growing city, but it would also dramatically affect its religious geography. A perusal of the Purāṇic *māhātmya*s will show that some of the primary features of the sacred geography described in the early literature are natural lakes and ponds, which would swell and overflow in the monsoon, reshaping the landscape of the city with each change of season. Many festivals and rituals had been linked to these aqueous phenomena. In certain years of heavy rains, the old Matsyodarī rivulet which ran through the town would fill up and reverse the flow of the Brahmanālā and Mandākinī streams which normally feed it, overflowing into neighboring ponds and beyond, so as to completely encircle in water the central sacred hill of the old city where the famous Avimukteśvara and Viśveśvara shrines stood, an event that was understood as being particularly auspicious (Eck 1999: 116–17). The construction of the drainage system had the result of swiftly rendering a great number of sacred water places dry and barren. Hence even as this city was marked as being distinctively 'Indian,' the British colonial presence was active in altering it dramatically attempting to clean, modernize and enlighten the city.

As C. A. Bayly has shown, the status of Vārāṇasī as being fundamentally Hindu in the eyes of the British owed much to the fact of the earlier unification of India under the Mughals. Geographically and socially, 'Benares was ideally placed to act as a crossroads between different linguistic regions. Pilgrims could now actually make the journey recommended in the medieval Purāṇic cosmologies and epics. The Benares *pāṇḍa*s (bathing priests and genealogists) now reached out westward for custom amongst the kings of Rajasthan and later, Maharashtra, while newly rich

11 The Matsyodarī drainage project was led by James Prinsep (1799–1840), a British civil servant known for his deciphering of the Brāhmī script, and perhaps just as well for his long-time affection for Vārāṇasī. Prinsep himself designed the Matsyodarī Tunnel and personally oversaw its construction (Medhasananda 2003: 430–438). Prinsep also produced a series of drawings depicting various idyllic scenes of the city, and these endure as some of the only surviving visual representations of the city from that period. These are collected in Prinsep 1831.

Bengalis came from the east to make their home in the holy city' (Bayly 2000: 99).[12] Vārāṇasī had also been a site of considerable intellectual exchange and religious patronage, especially from the early 16th century, when Maratha Brahmins and patrons began to arrive in droves, and a revitalization of the city began (O'Hanlon 2010). Thanks to this resurgence, the *māhātmya*s too enjoyed much wider circulation; and in the discourse of the *māhātmya*s the city's sacredness was pushed back deeper in to the 'clouds and mists' of time.

But as much as it was a continuation of its image built in earlier times, the era of British colonialism also aggressively introduced new models for imagining the religious status and history of Vārāṇasī. 'They adopted the Puranic self-representation in part, while historicizing and further stylizing it in their own post-enlightenment and early romantic cultural and political terms' (Dalmia 1999: 55). The contrast between Sherring's complete distrust of the Purāṇic representation of Vārāṇasī and the wholehearted adoption of the idea that Vārāṇasī was 'co-eval with Hinduism' could not be starker. And clearly, Sherring was not at all alone in these strangely contrasting beliefs.

Refining the Vision of Vārāṇasī's Past

While an empiricist historicism was supposedly a modern mode of thought distinct from the mythic idealizations of the Purāṇas, Sherring's assumptions about Vārāṇasī's past far outstripped his evidence. Sherring (1868: 10) claims that '[p]revious to the introduction of the Buddhist faith into India, [Vārāṇasī] was already the sacred city of the land, – the centre of Hinduism, and chief seat of its authority.' Even putting aside the anachronistic use of the term 'Hinduism' here, this was certainly not the case. Vārāṇasī is ancient, certainly: it already had a long history as one of the great cities of the subcontinent when Buddha taught his first sermon in nearby Sarnath, and archaeological evidence suggests that the city has been continually inhabited since at least the eighth century BCE.[13] But evidence for it being a locus for brahmanical or other 'Hindu' praxis in this early period is almost nonexistent.

This view of an essentially Hindu Vārāṇasī persists in the city's image in popular consciousness today. But for a city that is assumed to be an ancient seat of Hinduism, the paucity of references to Vārāṇasī in the early literature – the Veda and other related orthodox brahmanical texts – is striking. Early brahmanical sources are almost completely silent on Vārāṇasī as a city, and the same largely holds true even for the more comprehensive and chronologically later *Mahābhārata*. Only in the latter text, in fact, is there an explicit reference to Vārāṇasī as a holy place sacred to Śiva; but even there it merits only a single verse buried deeply in a long list of *tīrtha*s.[14]

12 This latter point is particularly relevant when considering the pilgrimage of Ramakrishna with Mathuranath Biswas, discussed below.

13 Singh 1985: 245; Bakker 1996: 33.

14 The Mahābhārata section on pilgrimage (*Tīrthayātrāparvan*) contains only a passing reference to Vārāṇasī (3.82.69), mentioning two Śaiva sites. See Bakker 1996: 33.

It is not only that the city or the region is infrequently mentioned, but the earliest mentions in the Vedic literature regard the place not as a bastion of Vedic culture, but quite the opposite. Writing several decades after Sherring, A.S. Altekar is, to my knowledge, the first author to note the distinctly disdainful way in which the city was referred to in the literature of the late Vedic period. He notes that in the *Paippalāda Saṃhitā* of the *Atharvaveda*, a healing spell calls out a fever from a patient and directs it to fly off to afflict the peoples of Kāśi, along with Gāndhāra and Magadha (Altekar 1937: 1). He also notes the eastward journey of Videgha Māthava and the sacrificial fire (Agni Vaiśvānara) to the lands up to the Sadānīra River (modern Gandak), reported in the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, as evidence that 'Aryan religion could make only slow progress in Eastern India owing to the stubborn religious, and perhaps also political, opposition of its inhabitants there' (1937: 2). Vārāṇasī, we are thus informed, was part of the eastern frontier lands that accepted the Vedic sacrifice at a comparatively late date. Putting aside for a moment Altekar's problematic assumption of an 'Aryan religion,' this verse, as several scholars have noted, does indeed seem to be a narrative marking of the acceptance of the Vedic sacrificial cult by various eastern kings of the late Vedic period (Witzel 1987: 26).[15] From the perspective of Vedic orthodoxy, the Kāśi region was considered a frontier for much of its early history.

Kāśi seems to have been a region in which the *yajña* was not only late in being adopted by the local rulers, but even after it was, it remained rather uncertainly established. This is made explicit in another section of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, which states that the Kāśi clan had 'lost' the foundational *agnicayana* rite after the defeat of the Kāśi king Dhṛtarāṣṭra by one Satānīka Sātrājita. Upon this defeat, the Kāśis are said to have lost the fire ritual for ten generations.[16] Along similar lines, a cycle of legends about the ancient Vedic ruler Divodāsa, an early king of the venerable Lunar Dynasty, associates him with the city of Vārāṇasī. Throughout the many variants of this narrative tradition, Divodāsa is consistently depicted as having had to leave the city, only to have his descendents reacquire it after a gap of some generations. While later versions of the story attribute Divodāsa's absence to a curse and introduce the figure of Śiva, early versions in the *Mahābhārata* and *Harivaṃśa* depict Divodāsa as being routed by his non-Vedic enemies and chased out of Vārāṇasī (Smith 2007).

15 Witzel is careful to caution that this passage should not be read as evidence for the migration (and certainly not the military invasion) of Indo-Aryan tribes, but rather for a much later Sanskritization process whereby certain chieftains would come to accept the authority of the sacrifice.

16 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 13.54.19, cited in Motichandra 1985: 16. See also the discussion of Witzel (1987: 26). It should also be noted that the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* has been parsed into several distinct layers of composition, hence the section which a given quote appears in would be significant for purposes of dating. Yet the fact that the Kāśi region was something of a frontier remains true throughout.

While M.A. Sherring's work on Vārāṇasī provided the basis for modern historical studies of the city, it is clear that his vision of the past was colored by his own religiously motivated aspirations for delivering Vārāṇasī, and India, from the darkness of false doctrines and a stagnant civilization that had failed to evolve. Vārāṇasī was the 'belly of the beast' for Sherring's mission; the place in India where the forces of darkness were most deeply entrenched, where the need for Christian, rational enlightenment was greatest. Yet he believed so strongly in his mission that he toiled tirelessly, working toward the vision of the city that he imagined for the not-distant future.

As the very epitome of an Indian city, Vārāṇasī was the perfect place to conduct missionary work; if also, for Sherring, the most challenging.[17] Unsurprisingly, he saw the Christian gospel as the harbinger of all things good: modern civilization, rationalism, independent thought, material uplift and the elevation of character; in short, 'progress.' Both the 'ancient' Vārāṇasī Sherring attempted to reconstruct in his scholarly endeavors, and the 'modern' Vārāṇasī that he administered to in the 19th century fell short of these ideals, and the reality of this was extremely distressing for him. Sherring frequently seemed frustrated by the immense task before him, his grand mission to help rescue the city and its inhabitants from error. The condition of the people of Vārāṇasī clearly distressed him:

> [t]here is no sentiment more depressing than that which is produced by the study of a people that have declined from bad to worse; from one abomination to another; from one system of evil to others more and more opposed to truth, to reason, and to God (342).

Yet while he despaired over its past and present, he remained ever hopeful for the future of Vārāṇasī, and that of India:

> While I look with profound regret on much of the past history of India, I look forward to its coming history with strong hope and confidence. The sacred principles of progress, which have raised the western nations of the world to that high position of civilization and greatness which they at present occupy, have already reached this land, and begun to operate on its inhabitants.[18]

The Vārāṇasī described by the venerable grandfather of modern historical studies of the city was, to a surprisingly large extent, a hyperbolic imagining. Moreover, while Sherring's view of Vārāṇasī was certainly influenced by broader colonial interactions and British assumptions, they were inherited also, ironically, in part from the very *māhātmya* tradition that he so deeply distrusted. It was the *māhātmya* tradition that deliberately constructed an image of a continuous sacred tradition that made Vārāṇasī and Vedic orthodoxy coeval, despite it being very much on the periphery of the Vedic world throughout much of its ancient history.

17 See, for example, Sherring 1868: 357.

18 Ibid., 344.

We see then that at least one scholarly approach to Vārāṇasī – the one that Sherring embodied – is complex and motivated by several other factors other than the dispassionate culling of facts. Sherring was a man of great passion, and in his own way felt a profound connection with the city that influenced his scholarly perspective on it. In terms of his relationship to the texts, his dogged insistence that the two streams of myth and history could not be 'demingled' proved to be true: not only in Vārāṇasī historiography, but in his own practice as well.

Ramakrishna's Golden Vārāṇasī

On January 27, 1868 – as it so happens, the same year that Sherring's *Sacred City of the Hindus* was published – Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, the charismatic 19th-century Bengali mystic, embarked on a pilgrimage to Vārāṇasī. The pilgrimage was sponsored by Ramakrishna's ardent devotee and supporter, Mathuranath Biswas, known familiarly as Mathur Babu. Mathur Babu was the manager of the Dakshineshwar Kālī temple, built in 1855 by his mother-in-law, the pious and well-monied Rani Rashmoni. Ramakrishna had been the temple priest, until his frequent spiritual ecstasies prevented him from attending to his duties, and began to earn him a reputation as a divinely inspired saint.

On pilgrimage, Mathur Babu traveled lavishly. In addition to Ramakrishna, his guru and most honored guest, Mathur also brought perhaps a hundred or more friends, family members and servants, along with Ramakrishna's own aged mother and his ever-present younger cousin and attendant, Hriday. Four full railway cars were reserved for this entourage, and along the way from Calcutta to Vārāṇasī, these chartered cars were detached from the main train for an exclusive journey. This was a pilgrimage fit for royalty.

Mathur Babu, as it turns out, also gave in charity on a scale befitting a royal pilgrim. At several stops at holy places along the way to Vārāṇasī, Mathur Babu arranged for feeding the poor and giving of gifts to the local Brahmins. This he continued in Vārāṇasī on a grand scale, honoring the Banārasī pandits, famous throughout India for their wisdom and austerity. During the feast, however, a bitter squabble broke out among the pandits. While the specific details have not come down to us, it is not hard to imagine it being a dispute over rank and privilege among the many Brahmin lineages represented.[19] Seeing this gesture of pious magnanimity devolve into a display of prideful greed and pettiness was distressing in the extreme to Ramakrishna, whose childlike innocence and finely tuned spiritual sensitivity were legendary. Finding such base worldliness in the holiest place on earth immediately moved him to tears. Whimpering, he spoke aloud to his divine mother Kālī: 'Mother, why did you bring me here? I was much happier in Dakshineswar' (Saradananda 2003: 609).

But this was not the only Vārāṇasī that Ramakrishna saw during his visit. Attuned to the spiritual as he was, he would go on to have a host of divine, inspiring

19 See Parry 1994: 75–150.

visions in Vārāṇasī. Once, when passing by boat near the famous Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ, he went into an ecstatic state while watching the bodies being cremated. He later confided to his devotees that he saw the matted-haired Lord Śiva himself drawing the souls out from the burning flames and whispering the liberating mantra in their ears, while Kālī untied the karmic knots which had bound them to the cycle of birth and rebirth. It was true: to die in Kāśī, Śiva's favorite abode, was to be liberated instantly (Saradananda 2003: 610).

Another time, Ramakrishna saw in a vision that the entire city was luminous and made of gold: every last temple, tree, stone and pebble of the place was pulsing with spiritual power. He saw that 'the real Vārāṇasī is luminous and full of spirituality while the external one is but its shadow.' This, at first, was rather inconvenient for the childlike Ramakrishna, who insisted that Mathur Babu have a palanquin take him across the Asī rivulet that traditionally marks the southern limit of Vārāṇasī's sacred zone, whenever he needed to answer the calls of nature: he could not defile the golden city by pissing on it. Fortunately for matters of practicality, this overwhelming experience eventually receded: Ramakrishna's biographer and monastic disciple, Swami Saradananda, reports of his master, that 'when that particular mood came to an end, he did not need to do that anymore' (ibid.).

Swami Saradananda's biography of Ramakrishna was among the first, and one of the most fascinating. It is at once a biography and a theological treatise: in it he explores Ramakrishna as not just an enlightened spiritual master, but as a divine avatar, a World Teacher for the age. For Saradananda, each episode in Ramakrishna's life has significance, as the avatar acts out his divine drama for the benefit of humankind. The author spends some time analyzing the significance of the vision of golden Vārāṇasī. He explains:

> The subtle form of the city had been made golden by the priceless love and faith of innumerable ascetics and devotees throughout the ages. The real Vārāṇasī is luminous and full of spirituality while the external one is but its shadow. (Ibid., 609)

For Saradananda, then, the real Vārāṇasī is its subtle 'golden' form, a sacred zone of pure spirituality, and the place of gross worldliness where pandits pridefully squabble over petty honors is, perhaps, merely a veil. Furthermore, Ramakrishna's visions both confirm and extend the pronouncements of the scriptures. Saradananda reports that the pandits in Mathur Babu's entourage verified his vision of Śiva liberating souls at Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ, telling Ramakrishna that 'the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* mentions that Śiva confers *nirvāṇa* on those who die at Vārāṇasī, but does not explicitly state how. Your vision clearly elucidates how this is accomplished. Your visions and experiences have surpassed even the scriptural records.'[20]

This is a key point for Saradananda. The scriptural statements of *māhātmya*s like the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* are authoritative, but they are subject to an even higher authority: the direct experience of spiritual virtuoso like Ramakrishna. Here it is apparent

20 Saradananda 2003: 611.

that a reverent, devotional approach to the city is not necessarily one of slavish dependence on the authority of the scriptural tradition, but it is something that can be continually renewed, extended, rediscovered and modified.

Conclusion: Kaleidoscopic Visions of Vārāṇasī

Ramakrishna's experiences of Vārāṇasī are fruitful to compare with Sherring's very different experiences of the same city, in the same historical moment. The first thing to note is a surprising similarity: both Sherring's scholarly approach and Ramakrishna's devotional approach are characterized by a deep, personal engagement with Vārāṇasī, evoking rather profound emotions; both were deeply affected by the city, though in very different ways. Sherring lamented deeply over the ignorance and squalor that he saw, and when he writes of the glories of Christendom that he sees in Vārāṇasī's future, he is clearly inspired. Ramakrishna, for his part, was moved to tears at the worldliness he experienced in this most holy of cities; but his epiphany of seeing the golden Vārāṇasī was ecstatic.

More specifically, the emotional potency related to the city, for both Sherring and Ramakrishna, seemed to arise from a fundamental conflict in competing 'visions' of the city that each had experienced. For Sherring, it was the contrast between the horribly backward state of Vārāṇasī's past and present – the city as a place of ignorance and disease – and the shining vision of Western enlightenment that he glimpsed for Vārāṇasī's future. For Ramakrishna, the contrasting visions were, of course, that of the mundane, worldly Vārāṇasī where the pandits squabble over money and rank, and the Vārāṇasī made of pure gold that was revealed to him while in an ecstatic state.

What can we take of these divergent but overlapping experiences of Vārāṇasī? First and foremost, we must recognize that the ways of experiencing the city are perspectival and changing, and intensely personal. There is no one way to experience Vārāṇasī, even within a single individual. Scholarly and devotional approaches may bleed into each other, even as they conflict. And perhaps this conflict is productive of deeper emotional exchanges with the city, whatever may be the ultimate goal of these experiences. Neither Sherring's nor Ramakrishna's respective engagements with the city are necessarily typical of 'scholarly' or 'normative' approaches to Vārāṇasī. Ultimately, there is no singular approach to Vārāṇasī, and each approach, when examined, can be shown to have multiple ideals, motivations and methodologies.

Finally, both Sherring and Ramakrishna take unexpected tacks with respect to the authoritative *māhātmya* tradition that is the source for the tradition of Vārāṇasī's sacred character. With his aggressively positivistic historical approach, we would expect Sherring to completely reject the *māhātmya*s as mythical fancy, and he does. It is fascinating, then, when we find that his view of the city seems rather profoundly influenced by the Purāṇic ideological construction of the city as fundamentally 'Hindu.' It is similarly surprising, perhaps, to see the fluidity with which the Purāṇic statements are treated in the case of Ramakrishna: certainly, the 'scriptures' are respected, but the ecstatic experiences of a great saint serve to validate and even

further clarify them. And there is no doubt that for Ramakrishna's biographer Swami Saradananda, at least, the ultimate validity of the *māhātmya*s derives from the experiences of great masters like Ramakrishna, who can see behind the veil of the mundane to grasp the world of the spiritual, ever-present behind it.

And neither is the vision of Vārāṇasī as sacred that emerges in the *māhātmya*s homogenous. It varies – sometimes rather dramatically – from text to text. It is through a careful examination of the rhetorical strategies that each text employs that we can get a hint of their authors' theological and political agendas, sectarian affiliation. Looked upon from this perspective, how can these texts be said to comprise a monovocal 'tradition' at all? On the one hand, there are consistent themes that appear, such as the *kṣetra*'s association with Śiva, and the idea that death in Kāśī grants instant liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. On the other hand, these are not mentioned in every text, nor are they necessarily present in the early tradition.

What is Vārāṇasī, after all? Is it the impossibly polluted and overcrowded city that appears as if its population outgrew its infrastructure long, long ago? Or, is its fundamental identity that of the eternal abode of Lord Śiva? There is the Vārāṇasī of legend, and the Vārāṇasī where real people live and visit, work and play. The legendary Vārāṇasī is frequently located in the past for many, and for Sherring the ideal Vārāṇasī was in the future; but for some, it is immediately and intensely present, at least for those with the eyes to see. What Ramakrishna's experience shows – with amazing vividness, at that – is that one's perspective on Vārāṇasī depends on one's approach and attitude; and that it can vary dramatically from moment to moment.

The *māhātmya*s of Vārāṇasī present us a kaleidoscope of shining visions of Vārāṇasī that are very deliberately designed to evoke a sense of awe. While these visions may often compete and conflict, none need invalidate the other, for all are invaluable for a full study of this fascinating city. And even amid the cacophony of voices represented in these texts, they still very consciously cohere as a unified tradition that looks upon Vārāṇasī with a sense of profound awe and reverence. And even as I have analyzed, parsed and sometimes relentlessly deconstructed this tradition, and even as, like Sherring and Ramakrishna, I have encountered obstacles and frustrations in studying the city and its *māhātmya*s, I am happy to report that, in my own humble approach to Vārāṇasī, that sense of awe and reverence has not been diminished.

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The Grammar of Assī: Kashinath Singh and globalizing Banāras

Heinz Werner Wessler

One of the most cherished Indian novels of 2011 brought Banāras back to the literary landscape of contemporary India. The plot of Chetan Bhagat's novel *Revolution 2020* is basically a tragic love story. However, its plot is set in Banāras, and the town is more than just a backdrop for the narration.

> Only the sights and smells of Varanasi came to receive me at the station. [...] Even the filthy and crowded streets of Gadolia seemed beautiful to me. No place like your hometown. More than anything, I wanted to meet Aarti. Every inch of Varanasi reminded me of her. People come to my city to feel the presence of God, but I could feel her presence everywhere. (Bhagat 2011: 95)

The enduring trope of 'the sights and smells of Varanasi' hardly needs explanation to any reader, Indian or foreign. Chetan Bhagat relates the awakening sense of spatial belonging of his main character to a deep love for a young woman. Both love relationships end in frustration.

The complicated and sometimes confusing plot of Kashinath Singh's novel *Kāśī kā assī* ('The Assī quarter of Banāras') similarly expresses a sense of belonging to Banāras and a sense of identity. It also has its topographical focus in a traditional quarter in Banāras, next to Godaulia (or, Gadolia, as Chetan Bhagat has it). In this case, it is Assī, the southernmost of the traditional Banāras neighborhoods. The local is the backdrop against which the complicated net of the narrative flow unfolds. The book, however, is not only about a traditional quarter in Banāras and the emotional relationship that a Hindi author has developed towards it. The novel is more than just a literary monument of a neighborhood in Banāras. In this paper, I will focus on the interaction of the foreign world with the people accustomed to the narrow pathways of a traditional quarter of Banāras in *Kāśī kā assī*.

The book is hardly a novel in the traditional sense. There is neither a main character nor a linear plot structure. The five parts of the book, published individually before being collected in this volume, and other, often funny, narratives within the different parts, are in many cases only loosely related to each other. They depict the diversity of communication between inhabitants of Assī, from common insults to intellectual and well-informed comments on world politics, constantly weaving together different layers of stories, including the author's comments and references to the readers. The book is an archive of all kinds of these interactions between the

often obscure interlocutors, mirroring the complexity of the public space of a traditional quarter.

Pappū's teashop in particular is in the center of the web of stories that literary Assī is made of. '*E duniyāvālo*!' 'Oh you worldly people!,' a reference to the rhetoric of the Kabīr-tradition, going back to the most famous poet of the so-called *nirguṇ-bhakti* tradition, is a typical phrase used as an emphatic address to people in the quarter and to the reader as well within the novel (Siṃh 2011: 31ff.). Assī and its inhabitants are the 'worldly people' and the fictive addressees of the author's continuing interventions into the text: they are the focal point of this novel, and in a way they represent the world at large, creating a huge communicative web, including all kinds of direct or more subliminal forms of communication.

The content of *Kāśī kā assī*, however, hardly fits into a brief abstract of one or even a couple of sentences – probably because it lacks a proper (love) story, the temporal structure of which would facilitate a certain linear narration. One individual neighborhood of Banāras – namely Assī, situated at the southernmost end of traditional Banāras – is itself as complex as the famous Sanskrit grammar written by Pāṇini perhaps as early as the second century BC, as Kashinath Singh explains:

> Assī is the 'Aṣṭādhyāyī' [Sanskrit grammar of Pāṇini] and Banāras is its 'Bhāṣya' [commentary]! For the last 30 to 35 years, Americans, mad from capitalism, come here and want the world to become its 'ṭīkā' [sub-commentary] ... but would any change ever happen just because you want it to?[1]

The *Aṣṭādhyāyī* is a gesture, on the one hand, towards the holy language of Hinduism, i.e. to the conservative world of learning (and also the pretension of brahmanic learnedness), and on the other hand to the extreme complexity of grammatical rules encoded in the extremely brief and mysterious *sūtras* and a complex system of cross-references throughout the text, made intelligible with the help of commentaries and sub-commentaries. In this way, Assī becomes the core text, and the rest of the town and world is the commentary meant to explain the core text and existing only in relation to it.

The trope is of course first of all metaphorical. The 'grammar of Assī' works like a fixed network of grammatical rules encoded in short textual sequences and their inherent cross-references between them. In other words, a universe of intertextuality is the basis for the construction of meaning. The world around can explain it, comment on it, but any interaction would be a relationship of the center to its periphery. The idea of Kāśī being the center of the world is a famous statement of the *Kāśīmāhātmya* and similar religious texts on Banāras, but Kashinath Singh uses it in another context to explain certain forms of interaction between certain Western visitors and the city's inhabitants.

1 *Assī 'aṣṭādhyāyī' hai aur banāras uskā 'bhāṣya'! Pichle tīs-paiṃtīs varṣoṃ se 'pūjīvād' ke pagane amrīkī yahāṃ āte haiṃ aur cāhte haiṃ ki duniyā iskī 'ṭīkā' ho jāe ... magar cāhne se kyā hotā hai?* (Siṃh 2011: 12).

The basic pun is that 'America' turns into the imagined periphery of Banāras. In this article, I will try to follow up this relation between traditional Banāras and the foreign, more or less secular, pilgrim to Banāras with his affinity to certain aspects of Hindu beliefs and behaviors to be recovered in the traditional parts of the town, searching for a loving relation to Banāras and the promises it stands for. At the same time, the introduction of the book says that 'simple people and simple readers are precisely the fertile soil that gives birth to this novel.'[2] The author has therefore no pretentions: he reproduces the narratives he is exposed to. The Hindi *upanyās* ('novel') in general is a much more flexible term than the English 'novel.' Kashinath Singh's *Kāśī kā assī* is in a way a proof of this. There is no question that the author and his critics both perceive the work in terms of the tradition of the modern *upanyās*. Following the cosmic and allegorical dimension of the 'grammar,' the 172 printed pages with their complex set-up of narrations could be argued to fall into the category of a kind of epic text. Kashinath Singh understands himself explicitly more as a chronicler than an author in the introduction – the chronicler of the day-to-day talk among customers in Pappū's teashop. Discussions (*bahaseṃ*) never stop in the shop, day and night, while people – the 'natives of the quarter' (*muhalle ke ādivāsī*) – keep coming and going. These 'discussions' Kashinath Singh declares to be the narrative substance of his book – they contain 'novels upon novels, and stories upon stories.'[3] The intertextuality of the 'discussions' relates to the complexity of the quarter and the town. The individual authors of the many narratives that flow together in *Kāśī kā assī* remain more or less unimportant – a perfect illustration of the 'mort de l'auteur' (Roland Barthes), Banārsī style.

Kashinath Singh (born 1937), a former professor of Hindi at the Benares Hindu University (BHU), is one of the 'four friends' (*cār yār*)[4] and a prominent senior Hindi prose writer of the post-1960 era, even though his publications are smaller in number in comparison to the others. Some of his short stories are, however, perceived as being particularly brilliant pieces of modern Hindi fictional writing. His 'completely personal narrative language,'[5] which grows out of the roots of changing new India, even 'reaches out to Premcand'[6] in importance, as the editor of his collected short stories writes.

Even though this is the case, he hadn't received many literary honors until recently, when he was awarded one of the most prestigious prizes in Indian and Hindi literature, the Sahitya Akademi's annual award in Hindi literature 2011, for his recent novel *Rehan par Raghu* ('Raghu on Loan'). He has continued to publish, particularly in the literary magazine *Haṃs* edited by Rajendra Yadav (Delhi) as well as in *Tadbhav* by Akhilesh (Lucknow), where his short stories and autobiographical pieces were mostly first published in recent years.

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2 *ām jan aur ām pāṭhak hī is upanyās ke janm kī jamīn rahe haiṃ* (Siṃh 2011: 7).
3 *upanyās kā upanyās aur kathāeṃ kī kathāeṃ* (Siṃh 2011: 7).
4 Namely Gyānrañjan, Ravīndra Kāliyā, Dūdhnāth Siṃh and Kāśīnāth Siṃh (Kashinath Singh).
5 *apnī nitāṃt nijī kathābhāṣā* (Vijay Mohan Siṃh, introduction to Siṃh, 2009: 12).
6 *Premcaṃd ko chū rahī thīṃ* (ibid.: 7).

His first collections of short stories were published in the 1960s (*Sūcnā*, 'Message', *Sudhīr Ghoṣāl*, [nomen proprium], *Ādmīnāmā*, 'Hymn on the Man'), followed by the first novel *Apnā morcā* ('Our Front,' 1972) on the revolutionary students' movement at the Benares Hindu University from about 1967 onwards, which Rana Singh uses as 'source material for the interpretation of the students' culture in Varanasi during the late 1960s' (Singh 2004: 285). 'Collected short stories' (*Saṃkalit kahāniyāṃ*) were published in one volume in 2008 (Siṃh 2008b, 2nd edn, 2009). The title is misleading, since it contains only a selection of short stories and – interestingly – the fourth part of *Kāśī kā assī, Pāṃḍe kaun kumati toheṃ lāgī* ('Brahman, what stupid idea has befallen you?' – see further below) as an independent *kahānī* and the last of 17 short stories.

It should be noted that Kashinath is the younger brother of the famous critic in the world of Hindi literature, Namvar Singh, and the elder brother plays a very important role in his life, as described in his autobiography (Siṃh 2008c). They both share a very simple and rural background. Their parents in Jīyanpur village in Uttar Pradesh actually had three boys. The middle son took over the farm, while the elder and the younger sons turned to the world of Hindi literature, one as a critic and the other more as an author of fiction, though both were based in academic studies. Kashinath and Namvar have always been on good terms with each other, personally and politically. The elder Namvar in particular is a staunch Marxist, and in particular among the predominantly rather conservative citizens of Banāras is especially disliked for his deviation into left-wing politics.

The perception of Kashinath as the 'brother of Namvar' followed him his entire life until today, and the association with his brother – including the allegation of being patronized by him – may well have harmed his career. Even though Kashinath was much less politically engaged, both in his writing and as a citizen, the brothers never fell out over political issues or indeed for any other reason. However, in his autobiographical writing, Kashinath considers it a special and courageous deed that the Sanskritist and Pali philologist Karunapati Tripathi at Benares Hindu University had accepted him as his PhD student: 'When the whole town declared me untouchable because I was the 'brother of Namvar,' he accepted me, even though the people were against it.'[7]

The PhD thesis was the final step in a successful academic education that started at the intermediary and undergraduate level in the BHU, when he lived with his brother in the same household. Unlike his brother, who later left the BHU and took up positions around Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and finally at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi, Kashinath stayed behind, became professor of Hindi literature, and never showed any ambition to continue his academic career anywhere else.

Much of Kashinath Singh's writing is directly autobiographical (particularly Singh, 2008c), and even in his fictional texts the autobiographical element is some-

7 *jab pūre nagar ne 'Nāmvar kā bhāī' hone ke kāraṇ mujhe achūt ghoṣit kar diyā thā to logoṃ ke virodh ke bāvjūd unhoṃne apnāyā thā* (Siṃh 1993: 18; Siṃh 2008c: 18).

how present. At the beginning of *Kāśī kā assī*, the novel is on one occasion called *saṃsmaraṇ*, the common term usually reserved for autobiographical memories with literary ambitions (p. 11).

Among the characteristic elements of both genres in Kashinath's writing are the constant references to readers, mostly as 'friends!' (*mitro*) or 'brothers!' (*bhāīo* or *bhāī logo*) etc. Also very common are references to his readers in the imperative: 'Listen!' (*suno*). This is a style to be found in much of his writing beyond the 'novel,' including his biographical texts. The location of many of his short stories is the historical Assī quarter in Banāras, where for most of his life he lived close to Lolārka Kuṇḍ, and the social and rhetorical interaction of traditionalism and modernity of strange inhabitants and visitors to Assī. As Vijay Mohan Singh observes, even though *sthānīytā* (a term difficult to translate: 'localism,' 'being rooted in a certain place,' perhaps including some sort of 'topophilia'[8]) of some sort is very important in his writing, he has left behind the limitations of his circle in a much more profound way than the other post-1960 authors.[9] In the introduction to the stage version of *Dekh tamāśā lakṛī kā* ('Look at the Spectacle, the Wooden One'), Kashinath Singh speaks sympathetically about the *Banārsīpan* ('the air of Banāras') of Arun Pandey, who had prepared the manuscript for that version.

Far from idealizing the traditional set-up of society, he is a close and at the same time loving observer of the people in Assī, made up not only of the proverbial simple 'man on the street,' but also of 'artists, drawers, journalists, leaders, and citizens' (Siṃh 2011: 20). Kashinath Singh's prose itself is in a way emanating from and transcending the grammar of the *muhallā*: his plots set off from the close-knit social fabric of Assī and its obscurantism, its self-centeredness and exposure to globalization, its traditionalism and rapid change – in short, its shortcomings and its human depths as well.

Perhaps the most significant and somehow poetic statement on topophilia in the book is the following passage:

> Finally, take it as having happened by force or by choice, I have selected this town for my living! A town of an unending humming of praise the Lord! A town of Sufi-singing and all kinds of struggling and noise! A town, in which a loincloth may be laid out on one shoulder or used to bind a turban. A town, in which people meet in front of the Pan shops from morning to evening to talk and laugh. A town of swear words over swear words, ritual washing places, of the rich, of the slogans in praise of Shiva and hand clapping.
>
> A town more beloved than one's life.
>
> A town uncomparable worldwide.
>
> A town – star in one's eyes.
>
> A town always enjoying itself.
>
> Help – it's my town!

8 Tuan 1974; referred to by Singh 2004: 142ff.

9 Vijay Mohan Siṃh, in Siṃh 2009: 11.

'Help!' because it was a town and a heavy mortar at the same time, into which I kept stuck my whole life voluntarily, having smashed my head into it. It always reminded me of my father who expressed his love in the language of beatings – the more love, the more beatings. Whenever I think of this town, it stands in front of my eyes like Akbar in the film *Mughal-e Azam*, flushing, it appears heavily breathing to me. These eyes, spitting fire out of anger, trembling body, rumbling voice. One can hear: 'Anarkali, Salim won't let you die and I won't let you live!'

> This Akbar was nobody else than the Hindi department and Salim was my Assī, the people from Assī, my educated and non-educated friends and the boys with whom I studied and whom I taught and who never understood that Akbar was somebody else than the most astonishing man and master standing and sitting among us.[10]

The small poem included in this part of Kashinath's memory writing in prose reminds one of Nazir Akbarabadi's (1735–1830) famous 'secular' poetry, his praise of Agra and its common people in the beginning of the nineteenth century. This seems to be a conscious reference to Akbarabadi, a conscious reference to the tradition of the Hindi-Urdu literary urban eulogy tradition, the so-called *Āgrānāmah*, a kind of declaration of love to Agra and its people, their shortcomings notwithstanding. Nazīr became well known among post-independence connoisseurs of Hindi through the play *Āgrā bāzār* ('Agra Market') by Habib Tanvir, which was first performed on stage in 1954 and evokes the poetry of Nazīr. Habib Tanvir, who stands in the tradition of a kind of Brechtian street theater, is well known for his brand of folklorism combined with Marxism.

Secondly, there is a reference to the famous film *Mughal-e Azam* ('The Greatest of the Mughals'), a 1960 Indian period epic film directed by K. Asif and produced by Shapoorji Pallonji – for many years the most commercially successful Bollywood movie based on a historical love story between Prince Salim (the future Moghul Jahangir) and Anarkali, a Hindu girl. The liaison is disapproved by Salim's father Akbar, which leads to an ongoing conflict between father and son and ends tragically. To be in love with Banāras is similarly like a socially unacceptable affair.

The other source of Kashinath Singh's strange *sthānīytā* is Phanishvarnath Renu (1921–77) and his so-called *āṃcaliktā*, even though the location of Renu's stories is mostly North Bihar. *Āṃcaliktā*, usually translated as 'regionalism,' designates a particular style in Hindi fiction usually centered around strange characters in North Indian villages and small towns. Renu's fiction is sometime underestimated in Indian criticism, where it is understood as some kind of romantic folklore, as for example in Shivkumar Mishra's *Hindi Literature: A Brief Account*: 'His [Renu's] limitations start from the point where he leaves behind the Premcand-tradition and gets encapsuled in the magic of the manierism of regionalism and turns into a 'regionalist.''[11]

10 Siṃh 1993: 19 and Singh 2008c: 22ff.

11 Miśra 2009: 118 (... *unkī sīmāeṃ vahāṃ se āraṃbh hote haiṃ jin binduoṃ par premcand-paraṃparā se haṭkar ve āṃcaliktā ke rūpvād ke jādū meṃ baṃdh kar 'āṃcalik 'ho uṭhte haiṃ*).

This statement, I think, completely ignores the critical content of Renu's *āṃcaliktā*. It could also be used against certain features of, for example, Premcand's famous last novel *Godān* ('The Gift of a Cow'), which – similar to Renu's novel *Mailā āṃcal* (The Dirty Border') – develops its plot from the parallel worlds and interaction between the town and its imagined modernity, and the imagined backwardness of the village. Similarly, it would be a clear misunderstanding of Kashinath Singh to interpret his narration of the people coming and going in Pappū's tea shop as creating an idyllic space without critical social or political content.

Assī is the microscopic image of traditional Banāras as a whole, and Pappū's tea shop is again Assī in a nutshell. The most important ingredients of communication here remind one of the chapter 'City of the Good Life' in Diana Eck's *City of Light*:

> They call it *mastī* ('joie de vivre'), *mauj* ('delight, festivity'), and *phakkarpan* [sic – should be *phakkaṛpan*] ('carefreeness'). [...] Everyone knows that Banāras is a good place to die. And it is precisely this fact that makes it a good place to live. (Eck 1983: 304)

Mastī is present in Kashinath Singh's novel, but at the same time the world and its problems are very much alive in the talk among the customers in the teashop. Their interactions are full of comments not only on local but also on national and international politics. 'The experts may have explained globalization, liberalization, multinationalism – and many other kinds of -izations in their own way, but Lāṛherām has understood them in his own way.'[12] People regularly comment on party politics in an ironic way, such as: 'In which party are you nowadays?' – an ironic hint at the constant changing of party membership among certain politicians (Siṃh 2011: 44).

People actively follow the preparations for elections, and discuss hot issues (Siṃh 2011: 72). Hindutva and secularism is a constant subject. One of the recurring points of discussion is the traditional poetry contest on Holi (*kavi sammelan*) that the Hindu-nationalist BJP wants to stop, because it is not in favor of the kind of mockery that is an important ingredient of the event (p. 19). Holy men are a constant object of mockery, as in the following cryptic Sanskrit couplet line: *ayaṃ mahātmā karpātr daṃḍī, yadā-kadā gacchati dālmaṃḍī* ('This great soul Karpātr, the ascetic, sometimes goes to the red light district') (Siṃh 2011: 6). The Hindi original plays with the rhyme towards the end of each line. Over the whole novel, hints at religion occur quite regularly and are often ironic in content.

Kāśī kā assī, first published in 2002, can be read as a declaration of love to Banāras and the strange humanity that populates it. It consists of fictional as well as non-fictional narratives, loosely connected without a continuous plot. One of the important subjects in the whole of Kashinath's writing is the interaction of the traditional quar-

12 *'Globalāijeśan', 'libaralāijeśan', 'malṭīneśanalāijeśan' – aur bhī dūsre ḍher sāre 'āijeśanoṃ' ko vidvānoṃ ne apne ḍhaṃg se samjhā hogā, lāṛherām ne use apne ḍhaṃg se samjhā* (Siṃh 2011: 105).

ter with Western visitors and their preoccupation with Indian culture. According to a communication with Kashinath Singh, the story of the young Western woman seeking to intrude into the world of traditional Hindu and Sanskrit learning in Banāras is made up of elements of the interactions between foreigners and the indigenous population of Banāras, but in itself is fictional and not an account of real characters. However, the story of Lāṛherām and Catherine (p. 104ff.), who as a couple turn into kinds of commercial sellers of Indian (Hindu) wisdom, is, according to Kashinathji, a fictionalized form of 'a real story.' The brief narrative episode concerning two people from Sweden in Indian *khadi* dress is similar in character (Siṃh 2011: 77). Much of the narration is made up of conversation between people meeting over cups of tea in Pappū's shop on Assī Road or occasionally at 'Kedar, the tea-seller' (*Kedār cāyvālā*, p. 16, 39 a.o.), and the author is himself a character in this context.

The author and Christiane Schaefer together with Kashinath Singh (second from left) and family members

The meeting of East and West is the particular focus of the fourth of the five parts of *Kāśī kā assī*, under the title *Pāṃḍe kaun kumati toheṃ lāgī* ('Brahman, what stupid idea has befallen you?': pp. 116–32). The 'stupid idea' is the teaching of Sanskrit and the renting out of rooms to foreigners. This part of the novel, which I have already mentioned as being published among a selection of 17 short stories in 2008 (Singh, 2009b), has formed the plot of a stage performance, which was played in several

towns of North India and can be found on youtube.com under the title 'Kāśīnāmah.'[13] The story itself – part of the book, but practically an independent narrative within the narrative – is partly written like a film script, with notes and suggestions for cutting etc. Foreigners and the interaction with them are very much present in Assī, either as 'normal' tourists, paying guests, or even as people directly involved in religious activities. 'Astrology and the paying guest – these are the supports of living for the local Brahmans' (p. 116). Kannī Guru – a short form of 'Kashinath,' the author imagining himself as being the cunning intermediary – is full of praise for the Sanskrit teacher Dharmnāth Śāstrī, who works as a part-time teacher at a school, and offers a place to live to a French girl, Madeleine (Banārsī-style given name: 'Sāvitrī'), who would like to study Sanskrit in Banāras with a teacher and guru (p. 117ff.). The guru (*ācārya*) finds himself in a dilemma: he urgently needs extra income since he has to marry off his daughters – a fact that the intermediary makes him constantly aware of – while at the same time he is prepared neither to teach a Western young woman nor even to let her stay at his house as requested by the prospective student who is completely ignorant of the social conditions and the traditionalist mentality of the teacher.

Even though he at first simply bursts into laughter on learning of Madeleine's desire to learn Sanskrit (p. 120), the offer is a serious temptation for him, since he will be able to make some extra income with the young lady as a paying guest. Even though his wife constantly calls her *raṃḍī* (prostitute) in Hindi, he is deeply moved by the fact that the deal might help him collect money in order to be able to pay the dowry for his daughters' marriages. The world of the Western young woman and the teacher are completely disparate. The guide plays his role as the interlocutor between the two. While the separation of these two worlds is an established fact for the teacher, who has no aspiration of his own to bridge the gap, the foreign prospective Sanskrit learner does not reciprocate this distinction. She naively believes she can cross the divide and enter the world of the Banārsī Brahman.

Under the pressure of the circumstances, the Brahman becomes ready to rent out the single room on the flat roof of his house, but then the problem of a proper toilet for the foreigner arises. Finally, he has to agree to have a toilet constructed at the spot where he used to have a small place for worship. The construction of the toilet somehow resembles Baka's dream of the introduction of the water closet in India in the early novel of Indian writing in English, *The Untouchable* (1936) by Mulk Raj Anand. At the end of the novel, this technical innovation appears to Baka as the tool to free him from his duty to clean the public latrines.

There is neither a happy end nor any other kind of solution to the conflict between the inherited sense of honor of the conservative Brahman and the brutal economic

13 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsSz5dc0w0U, and http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=tazEe-JIhGg (5.6.2013). The first part of the novel was also adapted for stage by Arun Pandey and approved by Kashinath Singh himself (Siṃh, Pāṃḍey 2008a). The announced release of a 2012 Bollywood film on the basis of the novel under the title *Mohalla Assi*, starring Sunny Deol and directed by Chandra Prakash Dwivedi, is still in the pipeline during the writing of this article.

necessity. He finally has to accept defeat. There is no alternative but to accept the paying guest with all its consequences: the teaching of Sanskrit to the foreign woman marks a decline rather than an affirmation of the tradition.

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Strong Vibes in Banāras: The views of Western sojourners on the Holy City

Mari Korpela

The first time I planned to travel to India, the image in my mind was from my geography schoolbook: a photo of pilgrims taking a bath on Daśāśvamedh Ghāṭ. The picture captured the essence of India for me. Later, when I backpacked around India as an undergraduate, I saw how diverse a country it was, yet arriving in Banāras felt like arriving home. During one month's stay in Banāras, I fell in love with the city and three years later, I returned to collect material for my master's thesis investigating the roles of European women in Banāras. This eventually led to several further sojourns in Banāras as I ended up collecting material for my PhD dissertation there, too.

A common understanding of Banāras sees it as an ancient city of spirituality. However, the city is also accorded with other meanings. When on the plane out to India to begin my PhD research in Banāras, the Dutch woman sitting next to me expressed her terror: 'Why do you go there? It is such a tough place.' In addition, many of the Indian expatriates whom I have met in Europe think it is madness that I have voluntarily lived in Banāras when 'it is such a backward place.'

In this article, I discuss the views that long-term Western sojourners in Banāras give of the city. Banāras is a popular tourist destination but it also attracts more permanent Western sojourners: there are Westerners who return year after year (and who are not scholars). They come from Europe, Israel, Canada, and Australia, numbering two to three hundred during the popular season that starts in October and ends in May. I refer to these people as 'Westerners' due to the fact that in Banāras differences between various Western nationalities seem to disappear when opposed to the 'Indian other.'

Most of the Westerners are of middle-class origin. In Banāras, they live in the same houses year after year. For many, this lifestyle has lasted for years, even decades. Typically, Westerners work for a few months in menial jobs or sell Indian textiles and handicrafts in markets and festivals in their countries of origin and then spend the rest of the year in Banāras, living on the money they have earned in those temporary jobs. Most are between 20 and 35 years old but some are 40 to 50, with men in the majority. In Banāras, most live within walking distance of each other, renting apartments in local houses. Most Westerners in Banāras play Indian music, while some do yoga, meditation, or charity work. A lot of time is spent socialising with friends. The most common activities include frequent visits to each other, parties, boat rides on the Ganges, cooking, eating, and playing music together, as well as attending concerts of classical Indian music.

I first encountered long-term Western sojourners in Banāras when I stayed there during my first trip to India. I found their lifestyle fascinating and exotic; it represented something very different from my own life as a university student. This article is based on the research I did for my PhD (Korpela 2009). I conducted anthropological fieldwork among the Westerners in Banāras for 13 months in 2002–3; my methods were interviews and participant observation. My material thus consists of 56 interviews (each lasting for 1–2 hours) and hundreds of pages of field diaries. In my dissertation, I conceptualized the phenomenon as bohemian lifestyle migration and my focus was on community construction among the Westerners. In this article, however, my focus is on the Westerners' views on Banāras. I have visited Banāras several times since finishing my fieldwork there and I am still in regular contact with many of my research subjects. Consequently I know that the discourses and practices I found there ten years ago remain and are as strong as before.

According to Michel de Certeau 'space is a practiced place' (de Certeau 1986: 117 cited in Hastrup and Olwig 1997: 4). In similar terms, Thomas Faist writes that space has a social meaning which comes into being with concrete social or symbolic ties (Faist 2000: 45). In this article, I elaborate on how Banāras becomes constructed as a space in the discourse and practices of the long-term Western sojourners there. On the one hand, they view the city as 'authentic' and spiritual, while on the other they consider it a difficult, even dangerous, place. In addition, they describe Banāras as a city of contradictions which they themselves have learned to handle. I argue that it is not only that Westerners accord Banāras with specific meanings but those meanings also affect their practices and further interpretations of the city.

The 'spiritual' and 'authentic' city

Most Westerners sojourning in Banāras initially backpacked around India. Typically, such backpackers return to their home countries after their trip and continue their lives there. My research subjects, however, liked Banāras so much that they decided to stay. Due to visa regulations and economic reasons, they do not stay in Banāras permanently but return there again and again. Therefore, they have voluntarily chosen to live in Banāras, and it is definitely not a random choice: they attach the city with various meanings and emphasize that they would not like to stay in any other Indian city.

First of all, the Westerners are very aware that Banāras is an ancient city and a holy city of Hinduism. Just as it was for me, Banāras is a sign of real, 'authentic' India for my research subjects.

> I like Banāras because it's something like the heart of India. So much going on also about Indian culture [...] Banāras is real India, still happening. The religion that they practice here, religion is big part of daily life of the people living here, the local people, and it's a very old city. It's actually the oldest existing city in the world. (Ivan, 45[1])

1 After each quotation from an interview, there is a pseudonym for the interviewee and his/her correct age at the time of the interview.

Although their reasons for being in Banāras are usually not religious and most of my research subjects are not studying Hinduism themselves,[2] all of my interviewees have some basic knowledge of Hindu and/or Buddhist philosophy and they appreciate the environment where they see religion strongly present in people's everyday lives. In their conversation, they construct a clear opposition between the spiritual Banāras and the secular West.

> In Europe, we see religion but [it is] ... just dead. It is a few people going to church and you don't see anymore ... the face of god who can make people change everything just for this. It's very beautiful to see. Here you really see because it's so many people, just with a simple heart, they just go. (Laura, 25)

In other words, the Westerners in Banāras appreciate the fact that religion is a living practice there. Many like to socialize with *sādhu*s and they spend a lot of time on the ghāṭs where they often see *pūjā*s.[3] While sitting on the ghāṭs looking at the slowly flowing river Ganges and the religious rituals being performed there, one can easily feel immersed in a kind of a spiritual bubble surrounded by serenity and ignore the dense, non-religious, city life. In fact, all the long-term Westerners live near the Ganges: the Banāras that they appreciate is the Banāras near the river. None of my interviewees mentioned Muslim culture when they talked about how special a place Banāras is; for them it is a Hindu city and as such it represents 'authentic India.'

Rājā Ghāṭ and Ganges

2 There are many Westerners in India who have adopted Hinduism or Buddhism as a way of life and who even lead their lives as Buddhist monks/nuns or as Hindu ascetics. Such people, however, are not included in this study (see, for example, Allsop 2000; Giguère 2013).

3 *Sādhu*: a holy ascetic; *pūjā*: a religious ritual.

This 'authentic' Banāras is also viewed as a traditional place. For many of my interviewees, Banāras represents a return to the past.

> When [...] I tell my mother or the men, how the life is here, they are not so surprised because they had the same fifty years ago, before the war ... like milking the cows [...] My mother [milked cows by hand] until marriage ... mountain life. It is almost the same life, also here. I saw oil lamps and, it was like that. [...] It was the same when they were children. (Anton, 32)

> [It feels as] if I was here one thousand years ago, in this place, with this same man, this same place, same clothes, nothing changed, nothing. [...] Also all the architecture is something out of time. [...] First year [in Banāras] for me was really a trip inside the time. (Yvonne, 33)

> Banāras is a temporal door, you don't see the time. It's amazing. (Donna, 28)

> Superficially, there are a few changes but it really hasn't changed much and certainly for local people, it's still the same sort of thing, for centuries. (Paul, 47)

In their talk, the Westerners often describe Banāras as frozen in the past. In such comments, the past is romanticized as representing an 'authentic' life which is preferable to the present. The 'authentic past' that the Westerners admire is a construction made from their Western perspective in the present: it is a romanticized and idealized construction that never existed the way it is now imagined. In fact, the dichotomization of the authentic, natural past and an inauthentic, even spoilt, present – conceptualized as civilization – has long roots in European romantic philosophy, above all in the ideas of the 'noble savage' (see, for example, Cranston, 1999, on Rousseau; Fabian, 1983). Westerners cannot conceptualize India, or Banāras, as a 'noble savage,' being very aware of the enduring and elaborate Indian system of philosophy; yet, Banāras is conceived as an ultimate other, as fundamentally different from the West, and this 'other' is a spiritual place frozen in the past.

When Westerners say Banāras is unchanging, they are actually ignoring the modernizing present. Much has changed in Banāras in past decades. Such a discourse of stagnation clearly reflects the image of the city as an ancient spiritual place. Obviously, Westerners cannot completely ignore the modernizing aspects of Banāras but for them, such aspects do not represent authenticity. Authenticity is a concept that has been widely discussed in tourism literature (see, for example, Bruner, 1991; Cohen, 1988; Harkin, 1995; MacCannell, 1973; Noy, 2004; Pearce and Moscardo, 1986; Selwyn, 1996; Urry, 1990; Wang, 1999). MacCannell's (1973) original claim was that tourism is a quest for authenticity: tourists are feeling alienated in their home societies and thus search for authenticity elsewhere. Authenticity is defined as something genuine, true, and original, usually seen in romantic terms and often referring to an 'unspoilt' past in people's imagination. Many scholars (see Wang, 1999) have subsequently argued that there are no originals, only endless reproductions. In other words, authenticity should be understood as a social construction.

All in all, tourists often assume that the 'other' can be defined as either inauthentic modern or authentic non-modern (Gavin and Phipps, 2005: 2). The same dichotomy seems to apply among the Westerners in Banāras. They despise the modern present as inauthentic. Yet, the past that Banāras represents is picturesque for them, something that they admire from afar but are not willing to fully engage in themselves, as they like their modern comforts such as refrigerators. Here again, a clear distinction from the ultimate other is constructed. In fact, the Westerners' whole lifestyle depends on modernity: for them, travelling abroad is easy and relatively cheap and within the current global economic system money earned in the West lasts longer when spent in a location like Banāras where living costs are much lower.

In addition to being authentic in terms of religion, Banāras represents authenticity in terms of 'natural' life for the Westerners there. Many interviewees appreciated that in Banāras, one lives in close relation with nature.

> What I like the most here [in Banāras] is maybe that you are not disconnected from nature. In a Western city, you never know how full the moon is, and it never has any effect on your life. [...] [Here] it's a huge difference: no moon, full moon, rainy season, hot season, people behave differently. [...] You're very connected to nature here, as much as you can be in a city. [...] There are monkeys, and birds and cows. They are a living part of the city. Without these animals everything would rot, everything would be stinking. They also give milk, even the cow shit is used for burning, for fertilizing ... as a mosquito repellent. [...] In a way, it's men and nature living together in symbiosis. I like many things here, they eat from banana plates, and [...] everything is recycled. (Noel, 31)

In Banāras, cows, water buffaloes, dogs, goats and rats are visibly present in the streets and one must constantly be aware of monkeys that may snatch one's food. Thus, nature – in terms of animals – is very close to one's everyday life. One also feels the rather extreme climatic changes profoundly since most houses in Banāras do not have air conditioning or good heating. Many of the Westerners claim to aim at a 'natural life,' which means, for example, that they prefer homeopathic or Ayurvedic medicines to Western medicines, and some grow herbs and other plants on their balconies. Many appreciate the fact that one can buy unprocessed milk and butter in Banāras, and one can cook with natural ingredients instead of buying ready-made processed food.

Cows on the alley leading to Nārad Ghāṭ

It is interesting that such a big city – a clearly urban environment – becomes viewed in terms of natural life. It makes more sense when one realizes the framework from which the Westerners make such an interpretation: the naturalness is connected with the spiritual and ancient image of the city. Moreover, as the quotation from an interview above suggests, Westerners emphasize the Hindu religion's close connection with nature – for example in terms of the significance of sunrise, sunset and the cycle of the moon.

Another important aspect that the Westerners in Banāras appreciate is 'genuine' social contact.

> Q: Why do you prefer to live in India?
>
> A: [In Banāras] we can speak with the neighbor, and the neighbor smiles at you, says good morning. This does not exist in the West anymore. (Aron, 42)

The above image of harmonious neighborly contact is obviously much romanticized since Banāras is a very stratified society. This nicely illustrates the point that in real life, local people do not necessarily live the kind of 'authentic' life that the Westerners admire. Such a discourse relies on the image of 'authentic' and spiritual Banāras where people are believed to be friendly towards each other. All in all, it seems that various things that the Westerners see and experience in Banāras are interpreted from the framework of spirituality and authenticity. There are also, however, other important ways to view Banāras.

Banāras: a difficult and dangerous place

The idealized and romanticized image of Banāras becomes very clear in the talk of the Westerners there. They also encounter, however, various hardships of everyday life in Banāras, and complaining about those hardships is almost as common as praise for the city.

> It's very difficult, Banāras is a tough life, they cheat you all the time. [...] It's the dirtiest city of all India and the people are the least educated from anywhere else that I've seen. (Rafael, 40)

The Westerners sojourning in Banāras not only praise the city but criticize its backwardness and lack of development. They constantly complain about the city being dirty and crowded and suffering from a serious lack of infrastructure – especially in terms of water, electricity, and rubbish. Hence, in practical terms the city is often characterized in negative terms. Moreover, while on the one hand, spirituality is much appreciated among the Westerners, on the other, it is also considered dangerous.

Spirituality not only means temples, *pūjā*s, *sādhu*s, and other visible signs of Hinduism for the Westerners in Banāras; it also refers to certain 'energies' and 'vibrations,' that is to powers beyond rational understanding. Many of my interviewees claimed they had not wanted to come to Banāras at all but somehow it was their destiny to come and stay: they say that Banāras 'pulled' them and they could not resist the call: 'I knew I had to stop in Banāras because this place, Kashi, attracts you, it's calling you. I didn't really want to but I felt I had to' (Margaret, 56).

Most mentioned that once they arrived in Banāras, they got stuck there and lost interest in travelling to other parts of India.

> I have a very strong feeling for Banāras, surely. I didn't see anything else about India, for many years, I came [to India] and took the first train to Banāras and when I left, I took the train out of Banāras. (Rafael, 40)
>
> It's difficult to leave this place. When you come, there is some kind of energy which sucks you in in Banāras and it's very difficult every time I have to go. (Sara, 32)

All this talk about the energy that 'sucks' a person in is connected with the 'strong vibes' of Banāras: almost all my interviewees mentioned the very strong energy that they feel in the city: 'There is a vibe here, it's true [...] it's a feeling. The feeling here is very strong in Banāras, very active' (Marcel, 31).

Although the special energies of the city attract the Westerners in Banāras, those same energies are viewed as overwhelming, even potentially dangerous: 'Very strange vibrations, *sādhu*s and all. [The first time I was here], it was too much [for me to handle]' (Ivan, 45).

Consequently, it was commonly agreed by my research subjects that one should not stay in Banāras for too long as one is bound to lose one's mental balance if one stays: 'I can't live here, no, no. It's full energy, it's too strong to live here, it's too strong, really too strong' (Donna, 28).

In fact, the danger of Banāras is not only a discourse but also a real-life fact. Western tourists frequently develop psychological problems in Banāras. These are sometimes related to drug abuse but not necessarily. Mental problems among backpackers in India are a recognized phenomenon: 'India acts as an amplifier of minor idiosyncratic symptoms which may escalate to mentally dysfunctional levels' (Airault 2000: 53, cited in D'Andrea 2007: 216). Most long-term sojourners in Banāras know about such 'crazy' people and some have been involved in helping them to return to their home countries. Banāras is actually a very special place to lose one's mental balance: cities loaded with particularly strong significance sometimes cause mental disorders for tourists. The 'Jerusalem syndrome'[4] is widely recognized (see Kalian and Witztum 1998; Bar-el et al. 2000; Van der Haven 2008) and the 'Paris syndrome'[5] especially affects Japanese tourists (see Nam 2007). Perhaps one should add 'Banāras syndrome' to this list? Very often, the Westerners who lose their mental balance in Banāras claim to follow a spiritual call; for example, they believe they have become enlightened.

Because of these dangers, the Westerners emphasize that one should not stay in Banāras for too long, and definitely not forever. A central aspect in such talk is defining Banāras as an ultimate other. Although seduced by the magic of Banāras, the Westerners carefully maintain their identity as different. The city should not be allowed to 'seduce' one to the extent that one becomes lost in it.

> Banāras gets claustrophobic, it's so ingrown, it's a complete world. My feeling was you can get stuck there and never get out. It's very absorbing ... but it gets more and more claustrophobic. [...] I said I have to get out of here. [...] I said no, I am gonna break from here. And it was, it was a traumatic break, because it was, at that point, you could stay forever. [...] For me in Banāras, I was never in touch with the rest of the world, I was completely sort of shut into this bubble. [...] I'm very happy that I left but it was a break, definitely it was traumatic, like ripping away from something. It's a very absorbing place. [...] Banāras, there is something sort of trap like about. [...] I think when you get into Banāras mentality, you don't need to go anywhere, you are not interested in going anywhere. You are not interested in a larger world, you are not interested in larger ideas [...] you sort of see them from a distance but it doesn't matter. I don't think that's so healthy. It wasn't for me. (Katie)

The quotation above comes from an interview with an American woman who had lived in Banāras for several years in the 1970s but was living in the USA at the time of the interview in 2004. In her comment, she describes Banāras as a place where one loses one's own agency and free will. This clearly conveys a message that the city has powers that are beyond one's rational understanding, and consequently it is a dangerous place.

4 *Jerusalem syndrome*: a visit to Jerusalem may trigger religiously themed mental phenomena (obsessive ideas, delusions, or other psychosis-like experiences).

5 *Paris syndrome*: a psychological disorder, including a number of psychiatric symptoms, triggered by a visit to Paris.

City of contradictions: making sense of it by living in it

According to the Lonely Planet guidebook, India is an assault on the senses (Lonely Planet, 1997: 16). For many Westerners, Banāras is an archetype of such an image: 'Many Westerners, in one life, don't see what my [two-year-old] child has seen in two years [in Banāras]' (Aron, 42). Many of my interviewees emphasized that Banāras is never boring:

> Banāras is one of the most interesting places in the world. It's not boring. (Tom, 36)
>
> I don't get bored in this place [...] I keep on being seduced by just walking down on the Gaṅgā, and it's always as if it was a new experience every time. (Marcel, 31)

The above comments refer to concrete phenomena but underneath, there is the understanding that it is above all the spirituality that makes Banāras so interesting. It is also a city of contradictions for many Westerners there:

> Because you have all the shit in the street, but also all these flowers, and the smell of incense. (Sara, 32)
>
> I think Banāras definitely is a city of contradictions. [...] There are like drastic contrasts, it can be a very pleasant city and it can be a very horrible city. (Marcel, 31)

In the Westerners' discourse, it seems as if everything in the city is extreme: in both good and bad aspects. The Westerners' everyday experiences in Banāras often contradict their idealized and romanticized image of the city and, in order to solve this dilemma, they seem to rely on the image of Banāras as a city of strong energies. It is not a neutral place but invested with various, negative and positive, meanings. It is an ultimately and fundamentally different city; it is, by no means, an ordinary place.

Despite the hardships of everyday life, the Westerners in Banāras are attracted by the magic they claim to sense in Banāras: 'People who come here, who stay, they catch it. If you get spelled by the magic, [you stay]. If not, you leave' (Stefan, 32).

So far in this article, I have illustrated how the Westerners in Banāras share a discourse where the city is invested with various kinds of meanings. Above all, Banāras is understood as an 'authentic,' spiritual, and dangerous place with strong energies. This discourse, however, also becomes a lived practice among the Westerners. Not only do they talk about the city in a certain way but they put this discourse into practice in their own actions in Banāras. In other words, the place of Banāras becomes a lived space through the practices of the Westerners.

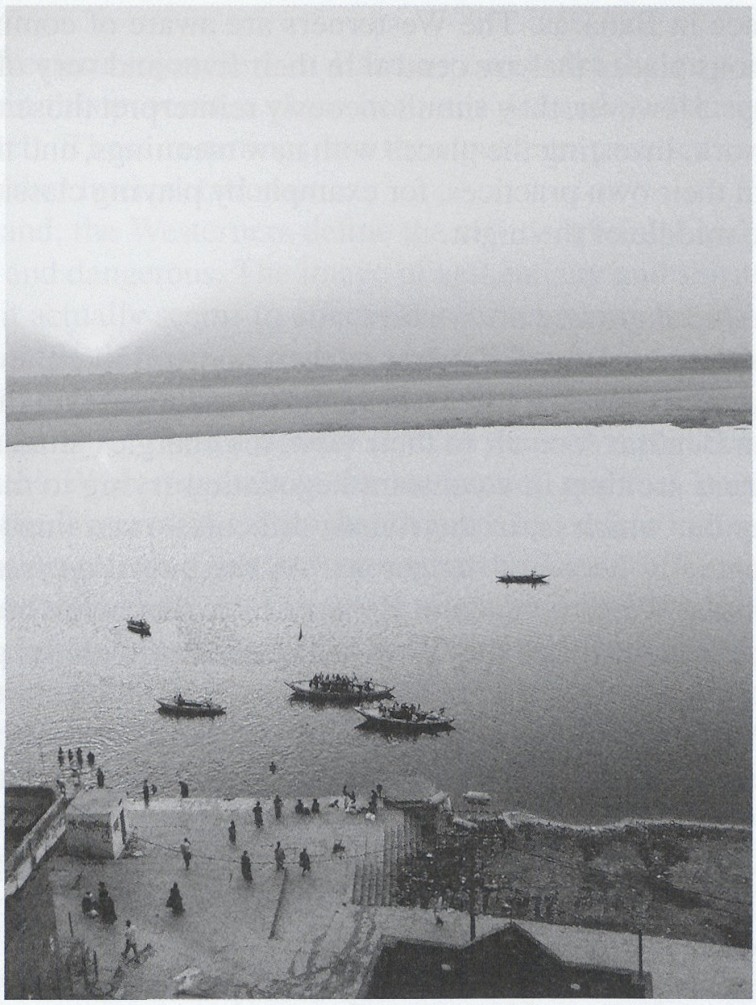
The Westerners emphasize the importance of spiritual values and spiritual growth. However, instead of following Hinduism, they define spirituality in their own terms, and Banāras offers a beautiful and 'authentic' setting for one's personal spiritual growth.

> I feel good in this environment, especially in Banāras where people go to make prayers, *pūjā* and full faith. This I like, really, I like very much. You feel united between human beings. (Donna, 28)

> They understand that all creation is one vibration. So if you speak this vibration, you connect, and so, we, I feel more part of, I really feel part of the universe, the cycle, I feel part of it here, there in Europe I don't feel. (Olga, 48)

Many Westerners in Banāras claim that 'Western' culture has lost its spiritual links, and in order to improve one's life, one must regain spiritual understanding. For them, good spirituality means personal experience instead of empty words and rituals. However, instead of worshipping Hindu gods, most of them talk about spirituality in broader terms, picking and choosing from various spiritual beliefs whichever suits them best. Such New Age spirituality – choosing from the supermarket of spirituality whichever combination of beliefs and practices pleases one at the time – is currently fashionable (see, for example, Aupers and Houtman 2006; D'Andrea 2007: 55), and India definitely has its share of 'the market of spirituality.' Among the Westerners in Banāras, this personalized spirituality may, for example, mean a combination of some Hindu beliefs and practices with some Buddhist and Christian or Jewish practices and beliefs.

Although the discourse of spirituality is shared among the Westerners, the combinations of particular practices and beliefs are unique to each individual in Banāras. Yet living out 'the space of Banāras' does have shared aspects. There is a particular 'Western geography' in Banāras. By this I mean that there are certain places that are central to the Westerners and the meanings they attach to those places are somewhat different from those of the locals. Firstly, all the long-term Western sojourners live within walking distance of each other, as a consequence of which their Banāras is actually a rather limited physical area in the city. Moreover, they all live near the Ganges, and the river is central in their daily lives. They spend time on the ghāṭs on a daily basis, they often take boats in order to swim on the other side and occasionally they organize picnics there. In addition, they regularly attend concerts in Banāras and these frequently take place on the ghāṭs, or alternatively in temples – clearly offering another spiritual setting. Certain tea stalls, shops, and restaurants are also particularly important to the Westerners although those may not be very significant for many locals.



Sunset at Nārad Ghāṭ

Music students also put the meanings accorded to Banāras into practice in their own activities.

> It is almost midnight. I sit on a ghāṭ by the Ganges River where I am watching a jamming session of Western music students. Several Indian instruments are played but there are no Indians present. (Field diary, March 2003)

Listening to and playing Indian classical music by the holy river in the middle of the night clearly contributes to a view of the city as a magical place. The diary excerpt above reflects that the Westerners create their own social space within the public space in Banāras. It is ironic that the Westerners play classical Indian music by the holy river of Hinduism, yet there are no Indians present. On that particular occasion, some Indians walked by but did not try to join in – there was an invisible boundary. Thus the Westerners can be understood to be performing or acting out *their* 'authentic' India that does not require 'authentic' Indian people (see Korpela 2010).

While the Westerners and locals share many common meanings of Banāras, the Westerners put them into practice in ways that are not necessarily shared with the local population. I thus argue that there is a Western social space located within the

local physical place in Banāras. The Westerners are aware of common local meanings given to various places that are central in their lives and very often they cherish the same meanings. However, they simultaneously reinterpret those meanings within their own framework, investing the places with new meanings, and they often act out those meanings in their own practices, for example by playing classical Indian music on the ghāṭ in the middle of the night.

Spirituality: here and there and everywhere

Many of my interviewees defined Banāras as their home: 'I like Banāras because it's Gaṅgā, you have many energies, I feel like home' (Susan, 27). Yet the Westerners do not wish to stay in Banāras forever; in their view, the energies attract but are dangerous. The Westerners are thus in a constant negotiation trying to make sense of the city that they love but which is, in their view, difficult – even impossible – to comprehend, and eventually becomes dangerous. As the quotation from the interview above suggests, many Westerners claim Banāras feels like home because its special energies have attracted them and they now feel connected with the place.

Seeing Banāras from the viewpoint of ancient spirituality has various effects. For example, a Westerner once told me how she had seen a boat on the Ganges on a foggy morning. She had thought it to be some ancient boat performing a special *pūjā* whereas when it came out of the fog, she realized that it was actually a police boat. In similar terms, when the Westerners encounter mentally disturbed people (either Western or local) in Banāras, a typical explanation offered is that the person behaves in such a way because it is Śiva's city.

The framework of spirituality is also very much present in the Westerners' music studies in Banāras. Most long-term Westerners in Banāras study Indian classical music; they constantly emphasize the spirituality of the music and the fact that this aspect of music is particularly strong in Banāras (see Korpela 2010).

> I owe a lot to this city, what it has brought into my life. And it's really special, it's mystic, different. And … it has taught me some things about music that I don't think it's possible to learn anywhere else […] because music here, is a religious thing, it's a totally religious thing and this kind of attitude you cannot understand anywhere else. You can't learn about it in a university, you cannot understand it in this way. Only here you can really understand the idea of devotion that's got to do with the idea of being a musician as they see it here. (Rafael, 40)

The Banāras environment and the meanings attached to it provide a beautiful and 'authentic' setting for the Westerners' lives and they act out the special place in their own ways, as Western agents creating a space and understanding about the city somewhat different from the local ones. Yet, the emphasis on spirituality is the overall framework into which the Westerners fit everything they see and experience in Banāras.

Conclusion

The long-term Western sojourners in Banāras construct the city in their discourse and actions and in this process, a place becomes defined as a space with particular meanings attached. These meanings are then put into practice in the Westerners' activities and further interpretations.

On the one hand, the Westerners define the city as spiritual and authentic, on the other as difficult and dangerous. The image of authenticity and spirituality of Banāras is so strong that it actually seems to affect almost everything the Westerners sojourning there say about Banāras or experience there. They come to a place loaded with meanings and they interpret what they see and experience from the given framework, but they construct and act out the discourse from their own particular perspective. In addition to talk, the Westerners create the 'authentic,' spiritual Banāras in their own practices. When the Westerners value what they see as ancient Indian culture, they are actually appreciating a 'frozen past' transposed to the present. The authenticity that the Westerners appreciate is therefore a construction and a very Western project; it is the Westerners who decide how to imagine and act out 'the authentic spiritual Banāras.' The discursive 'authentic' Banāras that the Westerners appreciate may not have much to do with the real life of local people in Banāras but it shows how images and discourses circulate and become reinterpreted and reused in real-life practices.

In the end, in the Westerners' discourse, living in Banāras is a privilege.

> M: What do you think, what kind of people stay in Banāras for a long time?
>
> I: Lucky people. (Ron, 31)

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The Orthodox Banāras or the Purification of Hinduism

Mathieu Claveyrolas

From 1997 to 2006 I spent more than a year doing fieldwork in Banāras. My PhD dissertation (Claveyrolas 2001) and its published version (Claveyrolas 2003) deal with the construction of religiosity through the study of the "atmosphere" of the temple, which may be faithfully conveyed by art. It is often described by observers as an invitation to "come and take a peek". But the atmosphere that devotees encourage you to feel as you enter the temple must be understood as a local and effective construction. Apprehending the temple through its atmosphere means starting with what comes before the rite and putting the religiosity back in the emotional context of the Hindu *bhakti*. The temple is the place of certainty. The atmosphere is functional, because the worshipper finds evidence there of the undeniable divine presence and because of the role it plays in the construction of religiosity. The atmosphere is a dynamic process at the crossroads of the systematic rationalization of temple space and individual, spontaneous Hindu devotion. This atmosphere lies between explicit, intentional communication with the divine and a kind of background noise that is charged with evocative power.

The temple is a totality within itself. If the researcher considers only its ritualistic *raison d'être*, he strips the temple of important aspects of its space, its participants, and its meaning. Not only is it a place of communion with the divine, but the space of the temple also offers an experience of cohabitation with the divine that extends to everyday activities. The temple is the place that makes possible permanent communication between men and gods. To come to the temple is to treat oneself to the experience of Hinduism's Golden Age. The atmosphere, a cocktail of various elements, is the product of a local and dynamic construction that is characteristic of two key modes of the Hindu relationship with the divine in the temple: everyday life and emotional experience.

This work was really a monograph of a temple understood as a relatively independent totality, as a "space apart". I described the various temporal sequences and various inner spaces of the temple compound, trying to consider all the actors. In this way, the work was somewhat different from the many previous studies that focus on Banāras. However, the questions raised – for example: How does a space come to be so religiously potent? – directly evoke a central question of Banārsī studies that this volume certainly is interested in: What makes Banāras such a special place?

Banāras seen from Mauritius

In this article, I try to combine an informal, personal, approach to my material with theoretical questions concerning Banāras and the anthropology of Hinduism. I would like to draw from my Banārsī experience but also from the distance I gained by switching to non-Banārsī Hinduism since 2007. I think this distance can make it easier to evaluate misrepresentations that sometimes pervade both local and academic discourses. The ambition is also to gain some insight into the representations of what Hinduism means, and the role Banāras plays in this representation.

I will start with my current research in Mauritius. On this small island in the Indian Ocean, Hindus are a majority. Most are descended from indentured laborers who arrived between 1835 and 1907. Among the original Hindu immigrants, approximately 60% were of Bhojpuri origin, including some who came from Banāras itself. As I conducted my research among descendants of these indentured servants, studying their temples and religious representations and practices, many anecdotes struck me as suggesting the importance of the image of Banāras, however distorted that image may be. It is on this image, and the all too frequent unwillingness of those speaking about Banāras to contradict the image, that I will focus.

When I attend a Hindu ceremony in a Mauritian temple, I often participate fully. I may prepare the offerings and ritual objects (oil lamps, flower garlands), for instance. On some occasions, I was even allowed to enter the *garbhagṛha* of certain temples, and to perform *āratī* for other devotees. This is not the place to investigate the reasons why I was integrated this way (which was not the case in Banārsī temples during my fieldwork there), but I do know that one of these reasons lies in the fact that my informants knew I had been researching in Banāras. This somehow made me, in the eyes of my informants, an expert on Hinduism. Seen from Mauritius, Banāras is a main point of reference for how Hinduism should be practiced, and I was repeatedly asked, even by Mauritian ritual specialists, to compare what I saw in the Hindu temples of Mauritius with what I had experienced in Banāras.

Conversely, there is on contemporary Mauritius a strong feeling of resentment among Mauritians of Tamil origins (maybe 6% of the overall Mauritian population) towards Mauritians of Bhojpuri origin. Mauritian Tamils consider themselves outside of Hinduism; they practice "Tamil religion", a category at least partially accepted in the official census. An anecdote might be illustrative here. A Mauritian Tamil priest showed me on his cellular phone a video of Aghori ascetics cutting up and eating dead human cadavers retrieved from the Ganges near Banāras. The priest knew I used to work in Banāras, and showing me this video was a way of telling me that Indian Hinduism (and particularly the Bhojpuri style of religiosity), if it was indeed a standard, also needed to be corrected. He insisted that nothing like this was happening in Mauritian Hinduism. As a matter of fact, neither castes[1] nor asceticism (two "plagues" of Indian Hinduism for local Hindus) are widespread in

1 On this particular issue my analysis has evolved. After a thorough research I now doubt the disappearance of the caste system in Mauritius (Claveyrolas 2013).

Mauritian society. According to this Mauritian priest, Banāras might well illustrate the "authentic" Hinduism, but this also means backwardness and even savagery. It is worth noting that such an evaluation is reminiscent of ambiguous colonial discourses on Banāras, or even the contemporary image that Banāras has for the elites in places like Delhi or Mumbai.

Beyond this point, I would say that Mauritian Hindus are very uncertain about their faith and practices. They often express doubt about whether they conform to the correct way of practicing their religion.[2] After researching Hindu temple practice in Banāras, observing such an uncertainty came as a major surprise to me. Mauritian Hindus explain that their ancestors, when brought to Mauritius, were cut from India and, from then on, deeply engaged in syncretism with the Catholic-Creole practices of former slaves. However, I would argue that what brings unease to Mauritian Hindus is not to be found in the historical conditions of migration and indentured labor on the plantations. On the contrary, it is primarily to be found in contemporary pretensions to sanskritize Hinduism in Mauritius. When they replace small plantation shrines with new monumental temples (which is a major activity in Mauritius today), Hindu Mauritians say they "go back to basics". But the question is this: What are these basics? What is the norm? I was taught from my early training in Indian studies that Hinduism is not an orthodoxy, but an orthopraxy. What matters in Hinduism is the correct way to perform rituals, and not a unique faith or precise representations based on a unique text. Old persons in Mauritius remember their practices back in the 1950s. This was indeed a syncretism with Catholic practices (candles, crucifixes, pictures of Catholic saints, etc.) but, for the most part, the old shrines that you can still observe in sugarcane fields quite faithfully replicate popular, village-like, shrines in India: unfinished structures sheltered by trees with no attached ritual specialist and with round stones to represent Kālī, the seven sisters, and guardian deities demanding animal sacrifices and alcohol, tobacco and meat offerings. Now Mauritian elites, copying Indian elites, try to install a Hindu orthodoxy based on the assumption that popular traditions were incorrect and thus need to be corrected. And, as is often the case, they claim this orthodoxy is nothing new but, on the contrary, the very reality of their ancestors.

Why such a discussion of Mauritius? Because Banāras occupies a place in this discussion of "orthodox" versus "popular" Hinduism, but at the other end: Banāras, though pervaded locally by popular Hinduism, as is every Indian town, represents in some ways the very orthodoxy that Hindu elites all over India and the diaspora are trying to impose.

2 For a discussion of the contemporary evolutions of Mauritian Hinduism, see Chazan-Gillig and Ramhota 2009, or Claveyrolas 2010b and 2012.

Hanumān and crucifix in a Mauritian popular shrine

Banāras or the Hindu profusion of the sacred

What Diana Eck calls "the locative strand of Hindu piety" (1981: 323) leads me to question the existence of a profusion of sacralized territories in India generally speaking, and specifically in Banāras. A sacralized territory would be a territory thought to carry a religious power and efficacy. In Hinduism, any of the following might be cited as a sacralized territory: the cosmos, the Indian national territory, sacred cities such as Banāras, each and every temple. I was particularly interested in the Hindu way of linking these many territories, which are all, to varying degrees, present in the city of Banāras, where I was doing research. Apart from my main object of study, the Sankaṭ Mocan Hanumān Mandir, I specifically focused on another space, the Bhārat Mātā Mandir, which is dedicated to Mother India (Claveyrolas 2008).

In this ambiguous place, poised between the status of a temple and of a museum, a visitor (or shall I say devotee?) told me: "Taking the vision [*darshan*] of Bhārat Mātā [indicating the marble map used as a divine image] is like going all around India. And travelling in India, this is like a pilgrimage because the land is sacred". Thus the temple/museum of the Banārsī Bhārat Mātā would offer a kind of pilgrimage experience of the totality of the Indian universe. We can identify the Hindu nationalist rhetoric with this rather odd temple. On the one hand, the national territory, even more than a sacralized territory, is assimilated to the divine body itself. Ramaswamy cites Aurobindo telling Tagore this is "not a map but the portrait of Bhārat Mātā; its cities and mountains, rivers and jungles form her physical body" (quoted in Ramas-

wamy 2006: 176). On the other hand, the nationalist ideology aims at encouraging the pilgrim-citizen to incorporate this idea of nation by means of the devotion to Bhārat Mātā, and by means of the pilgrimage understood as an enforcement of the territory as national body. We are already close to the manipulation of pilgrimages as political tools by Hindu nationalists claiming a Hindu national territory, which Gandhi, among others, had also done in his day.[3] From a pilgrimage circumambulating the cosmos symbolized by the Indian territory, we pass to a circumambulation around India, which is considered a total and exclusively Hindu territory. This is quite close to the definition of communalism proposed by Louis Dumont: "something like nationalism, but where nation would be replaced by religious community" (1966: 377). Ostensibly travelling in a national territory, "communalist pilgrims" claim a Hindu territory, just as Dumont points out when mentioning that "the communalist individual gives his community the allegiance he owes to his nation" (ibid).

We certainly know the importance of "travelling" on a Hindu pilgrimage, whether we consider the experience of wandering between sacred places on a spiritual voyage, or sacred sightseeing of modern pilgrims as tourists. The Hindu pilgrimage basically means walking around the Indian territory. The multi-secular pilgrim tradition has only been strengthened by the development of roads, train and plane networks, and other infrastructure. (*Tīrtha*)*yātrā* means both "pilgrimage" and "journey", and air travellers, like pilgrims, are called *yātrī*. Numerous specialized agencies are used by today's Indian rural and urban inhabitants to charter whole buses in order to travel up and down the Indian territory. Ann Gold (1988), who participated in such a journey, gave a wonderful description of it as "sacred sight-seeing", thus associating the trip (*going there*) with the sometimes very fugitive experience of the arrival point (*having been there*). To go on a pilgrimage (moving) is already to earn merit; performing ritual actions at the site relies on a mechanical efficacy that only punctuates the central experience of circulation. That is probably why those coming to Banāras from a long distance only stop there for a few hours, with traffic jams and shopping taking as much time as ritual activities per se.

The *yātrā* acts as a link in a complex network of sacred places, be it sacralized landscape (mountains or rivers), or temples and cities. Bhardwaj notes that "the Grand Pilgrimage exposed in the Mahābhārata encompasses the whole Indian subcontinent. Not only a yātrā, it is a parikramā [circumambulation] of the Hindu cosmos" (Bhardwaj 1999). This means that a pilgrimage is not meant to be only a visit of this or that temple or city, but, most importantly, it is a journey, ideally a circular one (Claveyrolas 2010a).

At any rate, how can circulation between different territories be justified when they all claim to represent the totality of the universe? The Hindu world is fond of the proliferation of divine representations, promoting a complex logic of substitutes. We know the legend of Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya, vying with each other to see who could more quickly circle the universe. Ganesha decided to walk around their divine

3 See for instance the study of patriotic pilgrimages (*deśbhāv kī yātrī*) by Brosius (2009).

parents, Śiva and Pārvatī, symbolizing the totality of the universe, and was declared winner. This logic of substitution is, indeed, performative. Other recent forms of pilgrimage tell us the same story, such as the *cār dhām* pilgrimage, which symbolically encompasses the totality of the Hindu territory in that it passes by the four cardinal cities of Hindu India (Badrinath in the North, Puri in the East, Rameshvaram in the south and Dvaraka in the West).

Coming back to Banāras, every temple is itself a substitute for the universe. This explains why it is circumambulated. The *pañcakrośī* temple is one of the best examples of this logic of substitution. A duplicate of the Kāśī territory, it is meant to grant the same merits (*punya*) to the devotee going round the temple and its 108 niches as to the pilgrim experiencing the *pañcakrośī* pilgrimage and its 108 shrines (Gutschow 1999). The omnipresence of the divine in Banāras (Michaels 2006: 131 f.) is stated in texts as well as in local discourses. Even urban structures, apart from temples and *kuṇḍ*s (Maṇikarṇikā or Lolārka Kuṇḍa, for example), are often presented as direct creations of a deity's *śakti*. Many anecdotes testify to this omnipresence of the sacred. For example, individuals, and even animals, are supposed to have obtained *mokṣa* inadvertently, just because they happened to be in the Banārsī territory. Legends also have it that, in Banāras, the cohabitation of men and gods is so perfect that every action is devotion; sleep is meditation, and conversation is mantra (Eck 1981: 338).

It seems to me that this is quite an exemplary case of the absence of profane space in India (Sax 1990), and of the consequent impossibility of even thinking about the profane. Indeed, the proliferation of substitutes for sacred territories parallels this non-separation of sacred space from any other type of space. Anywhere in the Kāśī territory, but also anywhere in the Indian territory, you are always in the same world, a world shared by gods and men. But how is it possible to enjoy sacredness if non-sacredness is unknown? As Eliade put it: "No world can be borne out of the chaos of homogeneity" (1959: 22). Once the relevance of the profane category is rejected for all of Hindu India, once the whole territory is understood as sacred, what about the homogeneity of this sacredness? Is the Hindu territory organized according to relative degrees of sacredness? Even if some Banārsīs insist that there is no real need for temples to communicate with the divine, I would like to know what kind of experience, available to the pilgrim crossing the threshold of a Banārsī shrine, will be sufficiently convincing, when he knows that what is outside the shrine, the very territory of Kāśī, already stands for the ideal sacred space?

In the Hindu temples themselves, the repetition, accumulation and superposition of devotional practices, not necessarily synchronized, is not uncommon. The performance of an *āratī* (offering of light) can go undisturbed while mantras are recited, *bhajans* are sung, or bells rung at the same time. I argued that this polyphony of devotional sounds reflects the Hindu logics of endlessly soliciting the divine, and increasing the potential efficacy of devotion. This probably fits with Annette Wilke's discussion (in this volume) of how sounds structure the world. In any case, it seems possible to parallel this idea with the escalation of sacredness in Banāras. Marie-Louise Reiniche, in her discussion of the Tamil city of Kumbakonam, pointed to "the

anarchy and multiplicity of temples [...] that can go as far as the overlap of one on the other, and the entanglement of their respective processional routes" (1985: 103). The number of pilgrims or devotees is one of the best indicators of the efficacy of a sacred site. In quite the same way, pilgrims and Banārsī residents praise the multiplicity of shrines concentrated in a unique place. The redundant effect resulting from so much sacredness is not chaos, but the very sought-after evidence of the omnipresent sacred.[4] For all these reasons, Banāras is often considered a paragon of Hindu sacredness. But what is Hindu "sacredness"? Is there at all such a thing as Hindu "sacredness"? I was repeatedly taught about the irrelevance of the sacred/profane dichotomy in Hinduism...[5]

All along their way around Banāras, pilgrims are experiencing and constructing the paradigmatic sacred territory of Kāśī (Singh 2002). Walking clockwise along the *pañcakrośī* route, the pilgrim finds, on his right, the pure space where *mokṣa* can be gained. But what about the left side? Can it be considered an "impure" space? The pilgrim will indeed defecate there, and he will definitely be caught in the cycle of rebirths if he dies there. This rapid sketch is a way to state that the *pañcakrośī* route delimits a rupture between an exterior and an interior. Crossing this boundary, even unwillingly (taking the wrong road, for instance) represents a sin that might destroy all merits associated with the pilgrimage (Gengnagel 2006: 151).

Generally speaking, legends – but also contemporary discourses – abound with anecdotes stating the virtues and dangers of the frontier that is more or less delimited by the pilgrimage route. Śiva himself was not forgiven for his brahmanicide (after having chopped off one of Brahmā's heads) until he crossed the *pañcakrośī* route; only then was he able to shed the divine head that had been stuck to his hand for centuries. And many Banārsī residents fear to cross the Kāśī border, because accidental death there would deprive them of *mokṣa*.

To the pilgrim, circumambulation (*parikramā*) of Kāśī defines the sacred city as a separate place, a place apart with specific conditions for acquiring access and protection. The two river-borders, the Asī ("the sword") and the Varaṇā ("the warning one"), explicitly play this role of protector.[6] This is quite close to the separation of sacred and profane spaces as Durkheim defined them: "Sacred things are those protected and isolated by proscriptions; profane things are those to which these proscriptions apply and which much be kept distant from the first" (1960: 56). The formula is quite clear and seems to apply even in the Indian case. However, the Hindu

4 The fact that Hindus duplicate this logic in Mauritius, punctuating each and every corner of the national territory with a shrine or monumental temple, proves highly controversial in the Mauritian multi-ethnic context.

5 For a critical discussion of the absence of the "profane" in India, and the resulting difficulties in using the "sacred" outside of the classical dichotomy, see Herrenschmidt 1989: 196–205.

6 Other examples abound, for example the Hanuman temple in New Delhi where the monkey-god's martial representation is linked with his status as *kṣetrapāl*, guardian of the territory. But, here, the territory is none other than that of the Indian capital city to be protected against Pakistani attacks! (Lutgendorf 1994).

thinking prefers the articulation of hierarchized totalities to any strict duality. Gods are definitely not absent from the left side of *pañcakrośī* route, and indeed, one will find many shrines there. Thus it seems better to focus on the relative superiority of the Banārsī territory than to oppose it to any profane space.

Banāras and the myth of uniqueness

We know that Hindu sacred places, whether they are temples or towns, are called *tīrtha*, crossing places between the worlds of gods and men. Banāras, reputed as one of the most famous Hindu sacred cities, is quite logically known as *mahātīrtha*, the great *tīrtha*. In fact, Banāras is often presented as the center of the universe, its very navel. Further still, Banāras/Kāśī claims to include all other pilgrimage sites and, in fact, the whole Hindu territory and universe. That's why, for instance, the main pilgrimage route around Banāras is marked by temples standing in all cardinal directions, and others symbolizing each Hindu sacred city. Being both center and totality of the universe, Banāras claims to be the ideal microcosm of the Hindu territory. No wonder such pretentions are found in local representations of Banāras carried by devotees, pilgrims or residents. No wonder either that the idea is omnipresent in normative texts describing the Kāśī territory and ordering local pilgrimages (*Kāśīkhaṇḍa*[7] and *Kāśīrahasya*[8]).

However, one must acknowledge that scholars have sometimes failed to keep their critical distance with such local representations (Eck 1983 and 1985; Kane 1941; Vidyarthi et al. 1979). The result is that even academic texts repeatedly display and transmit what became a kind of obvious fact when talking about Banāras, which is often compared with ancient Jerusalem or Athens, and is considered the obvious and eternal representative of Hinduism. Banāras would thus be the Hindu sacred city, the Hindu pilgrimage site, the city of Śiva, the city where rites for the dead and ancestors should be performed. It is viewed as unique and un-rivaled. The city is held to be, as Eck once stated, "the prototypical place for illuminating the whole Hindu vision of the world" (Eck 1985: 41). In other words, one can wonder what the exact role of scholars is in the very construction of this ideal image of Banāras.

Some have criticized this idealized vision. Bakker (1996: 32), for instance, insists on the historicity of the town, which helps avoid the mythological accents of a-historical visions. The case of Diana Eck is also illuminating. In 1998 she wrote a fascinating article criticizing her initial position (in the early 1980s) on this precise aspect. She came to the conclusion that Banāras is, in the end "not the center but *one among the many centers* of a polycentric landscape, linked by pilgrimage routes" (1998: 166, my emphasis).

Indeed, Banāras plays a prominent role in the Hindu pilgrimage network, and it is even possible to grant a certain primacy to the city. But even then, and despite its current international reputation, Banāras is not the capital city of Uttar Pradesh, nei-

7 One of the sections of the *Skandapurāṇa* (perhaps compiled around the 13th century).

8 The third section of the *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa* (16th century).

ther is it the main city of that state. The British were not that interested in Banāras. As a result, the city has not followed the same path as Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai or Delhi, and the colonial models have not pervaded its urban organization, which is more centered on the ghāṭs than on the British-styled cantonment model. Nor did the British vest Banāras with significant political or administrative power.

This more nuanced vision of Banāras is not entirely contradicted by the Indian perspective. The city's popularity as a pilgrimage destination is a relatively recent development. Bhardwaj notes in his study of Hindu pilgrimage sites that other towns, such as Pushkar or Gaya, were long preferred to Banāras (1973:41, 65; see also Freitag 2006: 242). Travis Smith (in this volume) also explains very well how sacred texts do not support Banāras's pretensions to be a stronghold of Sanskrit culture. Banāras seems to have been inhabited for thousands of years, according to archeologists (9th century BC), and it indeed stands at the crossroads of ancient commercial and cultural routes. But, while the Chinese monk Xuan Zang mentions Kāśī in the 7th c. AD and describes its one hundred temples, Banāras probably waited until the 17th century to develop an urban center around pilgrimage and religious trade. And we know that, until the 19th century at least, pilgrimage in Banāras was only performed by a minority of individuals, coming mainly from nearby districts, because of the concrete difficulties associated with travel, and because other sacred cities, and other, closer, pilgrimages were available, which offered similar efficacy and religious virtues. Srinivas (1976: 321), for example, explains that in Karnataka, even in the first half of the 20th century, a pilgrim coming back from Kāśī would be a surprise.

I would insist that this absence of any clear primacy for Banāras is not only a matter of historical evolution. In fact, every Hindu sacred city ideally represents both a shrine and the cosmos.[9] Every Hindu sacred city embodies the whole Hindu universe. Furthermore, even if Banāras encompasses all other Hindu sacred sites in its sacred territory, it is itself duplicated in other places: Kancipuram, for instance, might also be called a navel of the Hindu world. Not only does Kancipuram claim to be the "Southern Banāras", it also claims to be superior (Reiniche 1990: 197). Among many other instances, Anne Feldhaus (2003: 178) quotes another pilgrimage site, called Rāmtīrtha, in Maharasthra, that Śiva is said to prefer to Kāśī.

In fact, Banāras claims to be a specific *tīrtha*. It is Mahāśmaśāna (the great cremation ground) which brings an end to the cycle of rebirths (*saṃsāra*) for those dying within it and performing the proper cremation rites. Once more, this religious function is not exclusively a characteristic of Banāras: all seven Hindu sacred cities (*saptapuri*) are said to be granting liberation (*mokṣadāyak*) and one also goes to Gaya to perform the rites to ancestors, for instance (Eck 1985: 50). This is in fact a logic of successive imbricated models: each of the other six sacred cities grants whomever dies in its territory the favor to be re-born in Banāras which, eventually, grants final liberation. My point is that, in the logic of the Hindu pilgrimage network, one must remember, more

9 Among many others, see Burghart 1985, Gaborieau 1992, and Porcher 1985 for examples in Nepal and Kanci.

than the uniqueness of Banāras, the hierarchized articulation of many individualized microcosms, going hand in hand with specificities. It is worth noting that this individualization process of sacred sites is sometimes radical. The very mythology of Banāras sometimes contradicts the idea of a model Hindu city and claims, on the contrary, the identity of an anti-model, for example that Banāras is governed by principles contrary to the Hindu dharma. I would point to the religious organization of the city's geography, with a cremation ground right in its center. Elsewhere a cremation ground generally signifies extreme pollution and is relegated to the city margins. Is this ultimate evidence of the very efficacy of Banāras to grant *mokṣa*?[10]

Another example: Banāras challenges ordinary *dharma* rules. Such rules are supposed to precede and subsume human rules, but also divine rules. But in Banāras, *dharma* is abolished and even reversed. *Varnāśramadharma* is theoretically supposed not to be valid anymore; liberation is accessible to anyone dying in Kāśī, whatever their social status. Quite in the same way, it is customary to say that in Banāras "the tiger and the antelope are living in harmony". Such an image should not serve as a model in the Hindu world, which is founded on a hierarchical order in which everybody should live according to their predetermined status. Marie-Louise Reiniche, in an article subtitled "The Hindu invention of otherness and sameness" (1988, see also Reiniche 1990: 206), demonstrates how such inversions characterize the process of inscribing the universal deity (Śiva, for instance) in a precise locality (the many names and forms Śiva will take in each and every localized shrine). Finally, local representations describe Banāras as settled on top of Śiva's trident, which is neither on earth nor in heaven, and Banārsī residents are envied not only by men but also by gods. Similarly, Banāras is traditionally thought to be free of the degenerate Kaliyuga contingencies. Such a definition of Banāras as a time and space fundamentally apart, neither model of the human world nor duplicate of the divine world, invites us to moderate the representation of the city as a Hindu ideal microcosm.

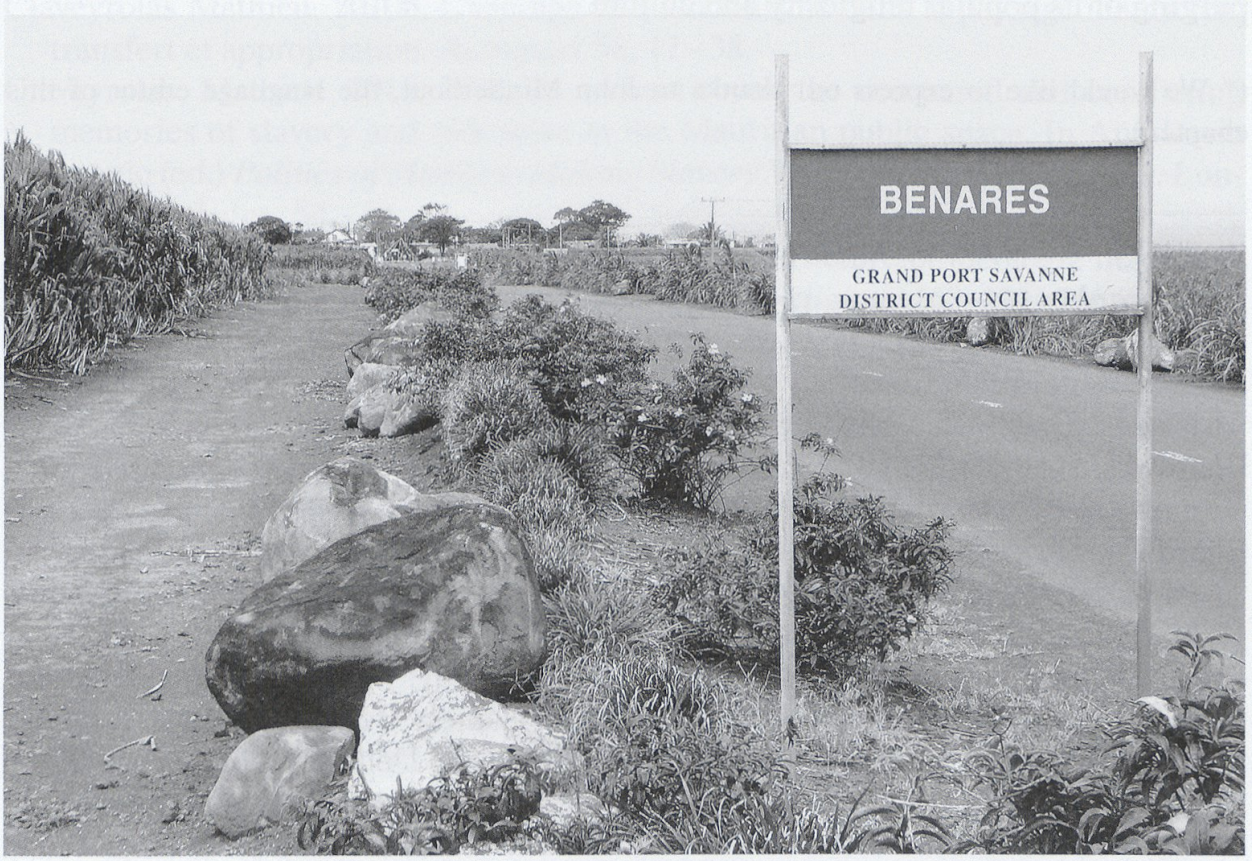
As a first conclusion, I would like to make my point clear. Banāras has indeed been, at least for a few centuries, one of the most prominent Hindu sacred cities among Hindu pilgrims. There is also this well-known tendency for every sacred place to represent itself as the model and center for the national religious universe. In such a context, I wish to focus on the Banārsī territory as one among other nodes in the Hindu sacred network, with the following specification: As is the case for other sacred places, Banāras articulates both the claim to be universal and a strong pretension to be specific.

Banāras, orthodoxy, and the definition of Hinduism

Partly because of its sacredness, Banāras is a cosmopolitan city. In Banāras, you can find people from various parts of India, from various caste backgrounds, speaking various languages, but also practicing various religions. As a result, there is also a

10 Jörg Gengnagel casts some doubt on the historicity of this centrality of Maṇikarṇikā (personal communication, June 2011).

sociological truth in the representation of Banāras as a microcosm. However, Banāras is also said to host a very un-representatively high proportion of Brahmans. And it stands in many ways as a representative, not of India, nor of Indian Hinduism, but of orthodox Hinduism. This is not the popular image that Banāras projects of itself, whether in the realm of religion or in music, to take two examples. First of all, one must not forget or underestimate the conjunction of many religions in Banāras. The Buddhist tradition in Sarnath is well known. But the Muslim community (a very large minority) also has (and has long had) a decisive impact on the Banārsī economy and culture. Secondly, the Hindu aspect of the city is biased toward learned, textual, and Brahmanic practices. Popular culture, in the form of shrines and deities, for example, is omnipresent in Banāras, but the popular side is all the more forgotten in favor of the mythological perspective of Banāras as a unique and eternal Hindu sacred city.



Entry sign of a Mauritian village named after Banāras

Let me return to Mauritius. Mauritians used to worship a stone-like deified ghost named Bram Bābā, who is not unknown in Banāras and the Bhojpuri surrounding area (Coccari 1989). But, in more recent and orthodox temples in Mauritius, Bram Bābā has been replaced by images of Brahmā, with the attendant iconography.[11] Most devotees in Mauritius are convinced that Bram Bābā was only a misspelling of Brahmā by igno-

11 The same process can also be seen in Bihari shrines in India (personal communication, Rana P. B. Singh, October 2011).

rant and illiterate laborers deprived of the wise teaching of Brahmins. If I were to tell my local informants that what I see in Mauritius is indeed Hinduism as practiced by Bhojpuri village people in the 19th or early 20th centuries, and even in contemporary Banārsī popular shrines, the comment would not be well received. Nor would they believe me if I dared to say that the fact that their ancestors came from Banāras does not mean they were the bearers of a learned culture and religiosity.[12] They want to hear about anthropomorphic images sheltered in finished structures, with vegetarian rituals conducted by Brahman priests reciting Sanskrit mantras. This is what Mauritian Hinduism is looking for, this is the image of Banāras they have, because this is the image most Hindus (Banārsī or Mauritian) are most prone to consider attractive.[13]

In the meantime, during all this process of constructing such an incomplete image of Banāras, the imagined Banāras has lost its complexity, mainly through the purging of its popular religiosity and culture.

(* We would like to express our thanks to John Minderhout, the language editor of this chapter.)

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12 Such statement by no means intends to say that there is any reason not to be proud of one's ancestors' popular culture. I simply note that, in the Mauritian contemporary context, the invention by descendants of indentured laborers of a dreamt learned culture carried by their ancestors, stands in the end as a major obstacle to social cohesion of the polity and is exploited as a major strategic tool in order to exaggerate the differences between the two Mauritian communities: descendants of Indian indentured laborers and descendants of African or Malagasy slaves.

13 I would add that I suspect my status as an outsider and a scholar may have exaggerated this tendency to promote and put forward such a distorted image of Banāras.

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Banāras: Encountering the experiences and expositions of the spirit of place

Rana P. B. Singh

1. Towards envisioning

The sacred bond between person and place is a reciprocal process illustrated in the spatial realm of manifestation (representation in miniature form), visualisation (architecture and the symbolic meanings imposed upon it) and the world of festivities (regulating and reawakening the spirit through rituals). The human relation with nature is realized primarily while narrating the place, understanding the place and becoming part of the 'spirit of place' (*genius loci*). The essence of 'place' consists of components like location, integration of nature and habitat, system of land ethic, and the dynamic nature of its changing value in tandem with the relevant belief systems and the associated interlocking networks. Place is the central nexus where we experience the harmonic relationship between man and nature. Thus the process of understanding a place is a journey in search of the interrelationship between the physical milieu and its metaphysical values.

All my life I have felt close to place. Place speaks. Place talks. Place communicates. Place is a growing organism, a form of being. Place is an interrelated community, playing between Man and Cosmos. Presence of place was real to me long before I knew anything of the forces by which this works. I remember that since my childhood I have sensed 'something' in and around a place. These visible and invisible messages have been a source of real meaning to my life. I have moved from one place to another, yet carried with me the memories and mythic sentiments attached to each place – from nativity (birthplace) to settlement (Vārāṇasi). I don't know how and why these are always with me. Somehow later in life I learned that place attachment is a human quest for understanding and also a feeling – the immanence and transcendence of a force linking Man and Cosmos.

Of course, we are surrounded by sense objects, but even more by images that are invisible to everybody else, but visible in the landscape scenario. The symbolic expression of place, the set of symbols that gives the people of a culture orientation in space and time, is pervasive in Hindu culture. We find in Hindu tradition that places such as special sites or natural scenarios – rivers, mountains, grounds, sacred buildings, and sacred cities – replicate the forms and processes of the cosmos, thus creating the archetypal landscapes, functioning and regulated through 'faithscapes' – a word I coined but which later was elaborated by Paul Devereux in his book *Re-Visioning the Earth* (1996). In fact, a passion for placement is basic to Hindu

thought on which I was nourished in my childhood. Sacred place as 'storied place' is eulogized in Hindu mythology and its oral epics with divine connotation – where myth and *terra firma* intersect. Banāras is such a distinctive place in India, a city known as the pride of India's heritage and its cultural capital.

The uniqueness and distinctiveness of a sacred place are its special aspects where the *genius loci* and aesthetics of human environment are deeply rooted and maintained by means of *sacred ways* – as reflected in the variety and layering of pilgrimages and associated performances and rituals practiced in Banāras. The quality of the sacred place depends upon the human context that has been shaped by it, with respect to memories, experiences, miracles, and expectations. The city of Banāras is unique in the architectural, artistic, and religious expressions of traditional Indian culture, and is a living example of this cultural whole even today. The cultural heritage of the city is 'special' and is an exceptional testimony to living traditions, to be seen and to be believed, in religious faith, rituals, and myriad festivals, traditional forms of worship and belief that are still practiced, and asceticism, spiritual exercises, education, music, dance, handicrafts, and art forms that continue to be transmitted through generations.

A paraphrase of Samuel Johnson's (1709–84) remarks on London is apt for the city of Banāras: 'By seeing Banāras, one can see as much of life as the whole of India can show;' I too have experienced this and spoken of it in my writings. In fact, Banāras is an archetype of all India, but it is full of complexity and contrasts making it too difficult to comprehend for those who stand outside the Hindu tradition. Those who love this city with their hearts and minds will share with me the metaphoric expressions of capturing space, time, and tradition. The city of Banāras has a long history as a center for pilgrimage, for mystics, and for scholastic traditions, while the vast arena of *purāṇic* literature has eulogized and glorified its prime importance.

2. Transformation and march

Born into a traditional farming family (on 15 December 1950) and raised in a small monastery under the guidance of an enlightened saint, Svāmī Saryudās (1855–1972), I was fortunate to learn the interconnectedness of text and context, and also of human beings and the divine Nature in my childhood. After some time had passed, in the late 1970s my quest led me to read the sacred landscape as a text so that I might understand and experience the inherent *genius loci* of Banāras. Ultimately this led me to try to interpret and reveal the meanings, messages, and milieus that were preserved there. This resulted in a constant march – a never-ending journey, which inspired and satisfied the inner quest (*svacetnā*) to walk and constantly encouraged thinking over the arrival, reach, and destination. On this road while walking, people from different parts of the world joined and made our group a companion of seekers, a mosaic of cultures, thoughts and visions through reciprocity of sharing and making pilgrimages together. Of course, I learned the first lesson about the life of the city as an organism when I was a postgraduate student (1969–71) under the guidance of my first teacher Professor R. L. Singh (1917–2001), the author of a pioneering

book, *Banāras: An Urban Geography* (1955); however, I subsequently turned to follow a different path for about eight years until, unexpectedly, on 6 April 1977, I met an American sociologist, Bradley Hertel, who inspired me to serve the cause of my own culture as an insider through discussions of my own experiences, comparing these with the reflections of outsiders from the West. That is how my journey for the deeper quest started and I became a companion in the co-pilgrimage, accompanied on this journey by others from different parts of the world.

With the inspiration, kind support, and invitation of the historian of Indian architecture Jan Pieper (Aachen, Germany), I fortunately attended an International Conference at the Max Müller Foundation Bhawan at Mumbai (Bombay), on 'Ritual Space in India: Studies in Architectural Anthropology,' on 22–25 February 1979. Through the presentation of a paper that dealt with the spatial segmentation of socio-cultural groups in Banāras, a new avenue of companionship and insightful way of learning 'sacredscapes' opened in my life. Through his kindness and generosity Pieper introduced me to Niels Gutschow, a German architect-historian par excellence, who over time became my mentor, inspiration, academic partner, friend, and eternal co-pilgrim in search of the *genius loci* of sacredscapes. Thus my journey on the sacred path and search for archetypal symbolism began again, the first product of which was the paper 'The Socio-Cultural Space of Banāras' (1980). Since then, with the encouragement of and collaboration with Niels Gutschow I realised that my journey had been transformed to study, learn, experience, guide and write about sacred space, sacred time, pilgrimages, cultural astronomy, and so on.

My first paper on Banāras was published in the proceedings-based volume in the Art and Archaeology Research Paper Series (London) in 1980 (Singh 1980), with the support of George Michell whom I first met together with Niels Gutschow at the Mumbai Conference in 1979; later we worked as co-editors of the book on *Banāras: The City Revealed* (2005). My second paper on Vārāṇasī dealing with geographical space and cognitive maps was published in the Frankfurt Social Geography Series in 1982. Afterwards I constantly and regularly followed the co-pilgrimage on the Banāras path, and the experiences, explicit exposition and co-sharing have been narrated in several publications (see the selected list at the end of the chapter). Through Niels I learned that '[b]y walking barefoot one touches the earth, and together with a special reverence for the Earth, the pilgrims experientially receive the essence of being alive in this world that comes from the earth and ultimately returns back to it' (Singh 1998: 57).

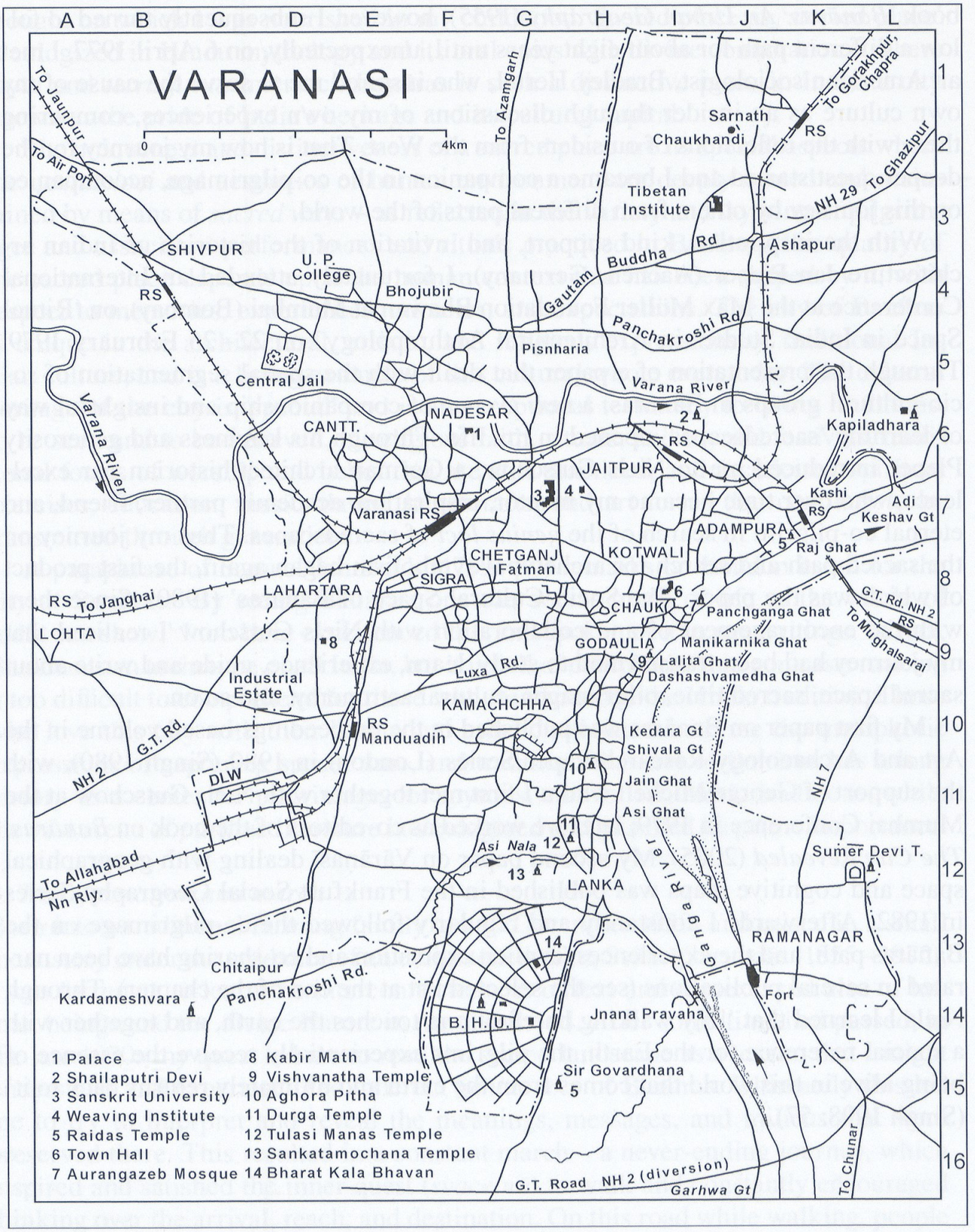

Fig. 1. Banāras: General Map

Through living and experiencing the city, I noted that in Banāras City alone there are over 3,600 Hindu shrines and temples, about 1,388 Muslim shrines and mosques, 42 Sikh temples (*Gurudvārās*), 12 churches, 3 Jain temples, and 9 Buddhist temples, as well as several other sacred sites and places and the scattered remains of images of divinities (Figure 1). Banāras is a cultural mosaic inhabited by 1.45 million people (2011 census), around one-third of which are Muslim. Among the cities of India Banāras is also the most referred to and described in mythologies (see Singh 2009a, 2009b). Devout Hindus say that the three bridgepillars (*tristhalīsetu*) linking the Earth to the Heavens are Prayāga (Allāhābād), Kāśī (Vārāṇasī) and Gayā. This can be revealed through the perception and narration of their distinct images. They express this as *Prayāga muṇḍe* (by tonsure), *Kāśī dhuṇḍhe* (by searching the labyrinth of lanes), and *Gayā piṇḍe* (by offering riceballs to ancestors). Through these steps one can achieve liberation. It is notable here that Kāśī preserved all the above three aspects permanently activated by the devout Hindus and pilgrims paying visits en masse (Singh and Rana 2002/2006: 19). The present paper is the story and résumé of my scholarly *tour de vivre* (pilgrimage) over the last 34 years, 1979–2013.

3. Symbolized space and cosmic frame

Soon after arriving in Banaras in July 1968, I tried to understand Banāras – where 'always ready' (*banā*) is the 'juice of life' (*ras*)! This 'life-juice' flows plentifully here in different colors, varying tones, multiple textures and layers, diverse situations, contrasting conditions, etc. The *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* (KKh, 35.10), the fourth canto of the *Skanda Purāṇa* dated around the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, says 'The Gaṅgā River, Lord Śiva, and the divine city of Kāśī make the Trinity of grace and perfect bliss.' The Trinity is symbolized by the three hillocks as the three forks of Śiva's trident on which the city is built, that is Oṁkāreśvara in the north, Viśveśvara in the center, and Kedāreśvara in the south. As a student of geography I tried to envision the three hillocks, and after several attempts I easily found the three symbolic hills that according to mythology are the three forks of Śiva's trident. During the later 1970s my first intuition was that the 84 ghāṭs along the arcshaped Gaṅgā symbolize the integration of the 12 signs of the zodiac (division of time) and 7 sheaths of the body or 7 layers of the atmosphere (division of space), thus $12 \times 7 = 84$. Later, having shared my experiences with others, this sacred number and its connotations have been widely accepted. Among these ghāṭs, the five of special merit are Asī, Daśāśvamedha, Maṇikarṇikā, Pañcagaṅgā and Ādi Keśava. Along these ghāṭs exist 96 Jalatīrthas, symbolizing the integrity of the time cycle (12 zodiacs, or months) and division of space (8 directions), thus $12 \times 8 = 96$. Enjoying boating and sacred walks and making stops at these sites reveal the numerical symbolism and spirit of place that are inherent to the site. Taking a holy dip at these five ghāṭs provides the merit of bathing at all the ghāṭs (see Figure 2). These five ghāṭs also symbolise the microcosmic body of Viṣṇu, respectively as head, chest, navel, thighs, and feet. Thus the area along the ghāṭs is eulogized as Viṣṇu's body.

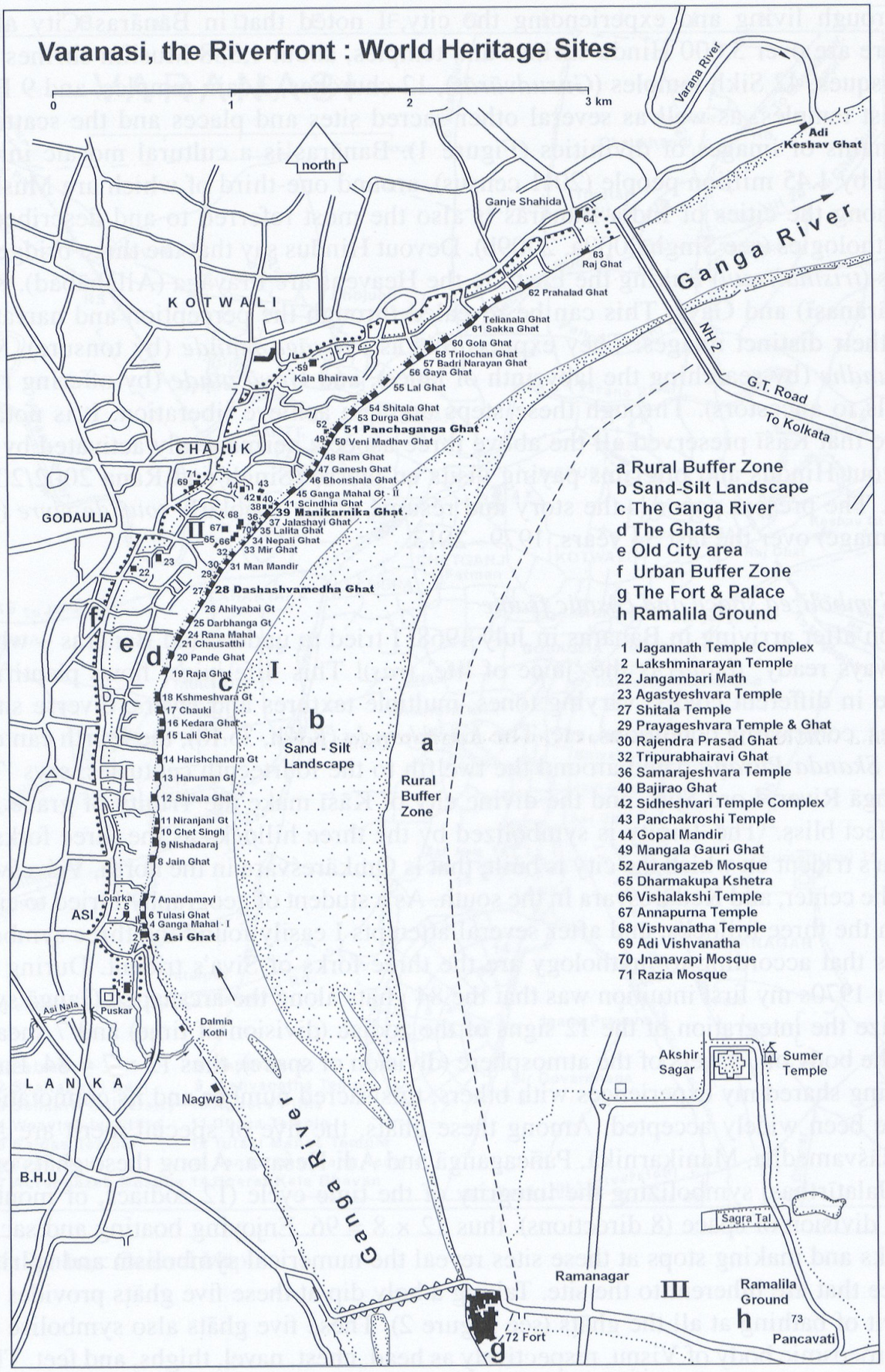

Fig. 2. Banāras: The Riverfront Ghāṭs at the bank of the Gaṅgā River

Attachment to a place is a prerequisite for developing a sense of the spirit of place. This sense of attachment provides emotional and spiritual sustainability to both individuals and the community. Attachment is an existential and phenomenological experience. The key to the future is in the commitment of human habitants living there who maintain this sense of attachment. Unfortunately, the Gaṅgā is on the way to losing its identity as a river, whose waters once purified the impure. The soul of the Gaṅgā lies in its history; the mind in learning and the body in the Gaṅgā. If Gaṅgā were to go, Vārāṇasī would lose its very being. It is the body that houses the mind as well as the soul.

I saw the lights along the bank of the Gaṅgā; I suddenly realized that was my home, where the earth spirit meets the divine – the revelation of life. I am in love with the holy Gaṅgā, the unique face of the town and its inhabitants, the unutterable solitude of the water, and the sweet security of its banks. I would set up my tabernacle here. I am content to stand still at the age I have reached – me and my friends: to be no younger/no older, no richer/no poorer, no more handsome or ugly. I do not want to be detached by age or appearance. Any alteration, on this earth of mine, in vision or in my home, puzzles and discomposes me.

Like many old and sacred cities in the Oriental world, a metaphysical ideology based on cosmological principles has been a dominant force shaping the cultural landscape of Kāśī, which has posed a deeper quest for me. In the human process of revealing and rediscovering the dialectic nature of wholeness, man has searched the niches and places of interconnectedness where nature, cosmos, and human psyche form a whole and that whole is transformed into the holy. I remember the *Mānasāra*, a tenth-century CE text of Hindu architecture, that mentions the layout of the Hindu city based on the 'cosmic cross,' the cardinal points of which are the corners of the universe, thus the whole city is celestial – a cosmogram, a sacrosanct notion commonly referred to in the case of holy cities. Kāśī means 'where the cosmic light concentrates in circle' and is a well-known example of the sacred cosmogram; later, using GPS and other means in the late 1990s, I measured and found an extraordinary correspondence. During this period, I reached a milestone with my guide and companion John McKim Malville (b.1934–), an American astrophysicist whom I met on the 13th of January 1993, and through whom I learned the visualization of cultural astronomy and sacred geometry. The symbolic and ritual landscape of Kāśī is a paradigmatic example of self-organization in a pilgrimage system. Pilgrimage circuits of great complexity and variety surround its center and enclose a nest of natural and symbolic cycles, which provide stability for the system and articulate its meaning.

As a wanderer and pilgrim in the 1970s I realized that Kāśī contains many sacred routes and territories defined and followed by pilgrims in different contexts; however, five among them are given special consideration in terms of cosmogony, sacred geometry and intensity of visitation. From my own understanding of Sanskrit texts and teachings from *paṇḍit*s of Banāras, I found the cosmic *maṇḍala* of Kāśī is delineated by the greater circuit, referred to as the Caurāsīkrośī – of course it is a mat-

ter of investigation when this route was used for pilgrimage! The other four routes form an irregular circular shape, while the covering and outer route is identical to a circle (Figure 3), well illustrated by topographic mapping, initially inspired of course by Niels Gutschow. As authenticated by the texts and experienced by those on pilgrimage, the four inner sacred journeys can be found to meet at Jñānavāpī, the *axis mundi*, from where all those on pilgrimage start by taking a vow (*saṅkalpa lenā*) and where they complete their pilgrimage with the ritual release from the vow (*saṅkalpa choḍānā*). Spatially, the temple of Madhyameśvara serves as the center for the covering circle, and is first referred to in the *Padma Purāṇa* (*Sṛṣtikhaṇḍa*, 65.14–20), a seventh-century text. The pilgrimage to the outer circuit, Caurāśīkrośī, was no longer performed until recently; however, over the last few years it has been revived, partly of course through the initiative of Svāmī Śivānanda, a 95-year-old *sanyāsī* of the Daṇḍī sect. I also took part in this pilgrimage and prepared the first map showing all the sacred places and shrines. With the existence of the above two *axes mundi*, Jñānavāpī and Madhyameśvara, the whole system becomes a complex of interpolation and superimposition for an awakened pilgrim to experience. The core of the inner world is delineated by another pilgrimage route called Viśveśvara's Antargṛha Kṣetra. In between the two are three pilgrimage circuits, namely Pañcakrośī, Nagara Pradakṣiṇā, and Avimukta.

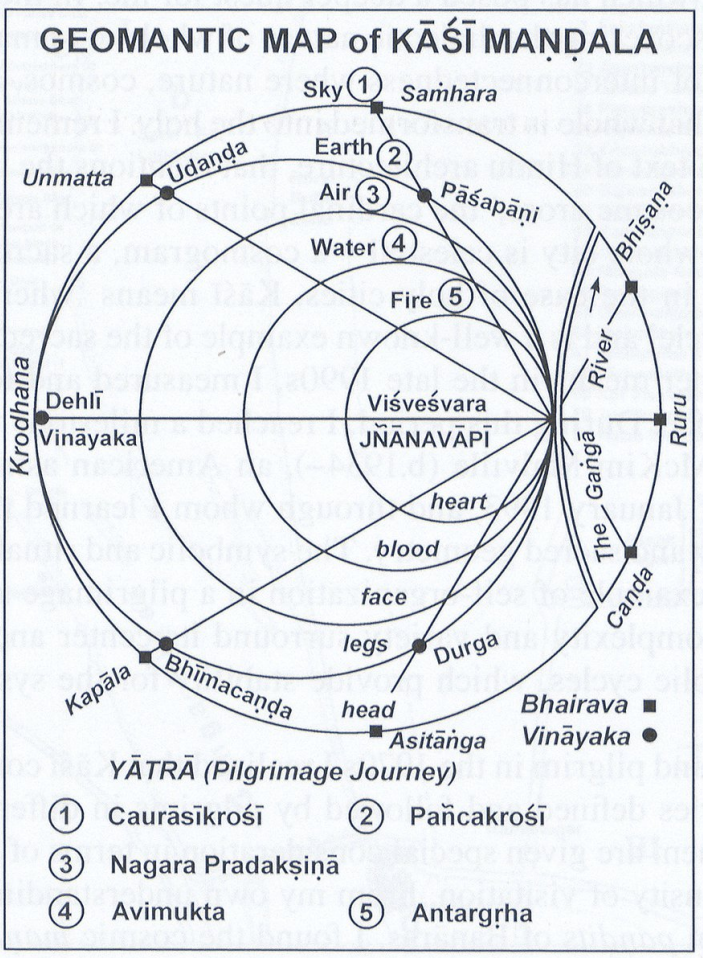

Fig. 3. The Kāśī Maṇḍala: Geomantic Map

These five sacred territories are mythologized as the archetypal manifestation of *macrocosmos*, the five gross elements (*mahābhūtas*), i.e. water (*jala*), land (*kṣiti*), air (*vāyu*), fire (*agni*), and sky (*ākāśa*), which together form life. The corresponding five sacred routes (*yātrāmārgas*) are representative of *mesocosmos*. The body symbolism (associated with the transcendental power and the sheath, *kośa*), or a temple possessing all the important divine images (e.g. Pañcakrośī Temple), is an example of *microcosmos* (Singh 2002, 2009b). I have performed these pilgrimages several times, and continue to do so still, in the quest of experiencing new and insightful experiences in search of the *genius loci*.

4. Śiva's universe

In the quest to know the total number of divine images and forms, it appears that there are around 3,600 images described historically and in the literature of Hindu deities in temples and shrines in the city of Vārāṇasī, as also suggested in several other treatises and mythological texts (Purāṇas). Being interested in the taxonomy of divinities, I obviously noted that according to the KKh in Vārāṇasī there appear innumerable images of Hindu divinities; notable among them are the following: Śiva's form 524, Vināyaka (Gaṇeśa, elephant-headed god, son of Śiva) 74, Śiva's associates 27, Rudra 11, Jyotira liṅgas (light-manifested) of Śiva 12, Svayaṁbhū liṅgas (self-manifested) of Śiva 12, Ṛṣi liṅgas (sage associated images) of Śiva 7, Devī (goddess) 96, Viṣṇu's form 48, Bhairava 17, Vasus 8, Sun god 14, Hindu planets (*grahas*) 9, sacred abodes (*saptapurīs*) 7, sacred areas (monthly base) 13, sacred land areas 2, river confluences (Asī and Varaṇā to the Gaṅgā) 2, the sacred water spots along the Gaṅgā 96, sacred water pools (*kuṇḍa*) 31, sacred wells (*kūpa*) 22. Of course some of them are lost and some have had their identity transformed, as I found during the pilgrimages and personal surveys; however, the majority of them still exist and are part of the contemporary pilgrimage, visitation, and ritual systems.

Kāśī (Vārāṇasī) is Śiva's city where He roams in an infinite number of forms. According to the KKh there are 524 forms of Śiva, of which 324 still exist and can be identified on the religious map of Kāśī; the rest are still unidentified. Śiva's predominance is well marked in most of the popular pilgrimage journeys (Singh 2009b). Among the 52 main yātrās the eight most commonly still in use are: Pañcakrośī Yātrā, Nagara Pradakṣiṇā, Avimukta Yātrā, Viśveśvara Antargṛha, Kedāreśvara Antargṛha, Oṁkāreśvara Antargṛha, Uttara Mānasa Yātrā, and Dakṣiṇa Mānasa Yātrā. However, the numbers of pilgrims varies according to the importance bestowed by the Purāṇic literature and treatises, and also to the changing attitudes of people towards religious practices. All these *tīrthayātrās* are subject to the sacredness of space and time, especially the auspicious times which possess relatively more capacity to provide merit.

The Pañcakrośī Yātrā, the intercalary month (*malamāsa*), falling every third year, is the most auspicious time and attracts around a million pilgrims from all parts of India (Singh 2002, 2009b). I myself have performed this pilgrimage five times for the full five days and over 300 times in a shorter form using a vehicle for a day.

5. Cosmic frame and the place of Ādityas (Sun) shrines

During my childhood (late 1950s–early 1960s) when I was living a monastic life, I was taught by my master Svāmī Saryudās that the Sun is the basis of all living beings on earth, that the Sun's energy might have been conceived as motherly power in the animistic beliefs of former times, and, probably due to this perception, worship of the Sun in the form of a goddess would have started somewhere in the remote past. However, Sun shrines and images are projected as male. The location of Sun shrines has a strong cultural and astronomical association and a secret mythological narrative. During 1993–6 while working with Kim Malville I realized this, which helped me to understand the cosmic frame of the sacredscapes of Vārāṇasī. Of course, although at present Sun worship is not so prominent in the ritual landscape of Kāśī, the Sun god is regularly visited and worshipped together with other major gods like Śiva, Viṣṇu, and the goddess.

Through field survey and mapping (using GPS) together with Kim Malville (January 1993), I found that out of 14 Āditya shrines, 10 lie approximately along an isosceles triangles formed by Uttarārka (no. 14), Karṇa (no. 3), and Khakhola Āditya (no. 11). The longest side is established by the Karṇa and the northern sun, Uttarārka; this line represents the cosmic north with a little variation of only 1.14° eastward, which is negligible in human cognition. The two opposite sides of the triangle are 2,001 m and 1,997 m, respectively, equal to within 0.2 percent, which is comparable to the precision of our GPS data (see Singh 2009c: 181). The shrine of Madhyameśvara lies inside the triangle, a mere 45 meters away from the center of the 2.5-km long north–south side. The geometric regularity of the Ādityas combined with our discovery of the center of the Āditya triangle encourages us to believe that we have recovered the sites of many of the original Sun temples (see Figure 4).

From the combination of texts (mythologies) and contexts (personal surveys), I have observed that a number of the Ādityas are associated with specific astronomical events and solar symbolism. Demystifying these narratives and with support of field observations, a fresh understanding came to light. Further south, Mayukha Āditya (no. 9) describing an event when the Sun left the sky, with only his rays remaining, may be associated with the total solar eclipse that was visible in Vārāṇasī in CE 1054.

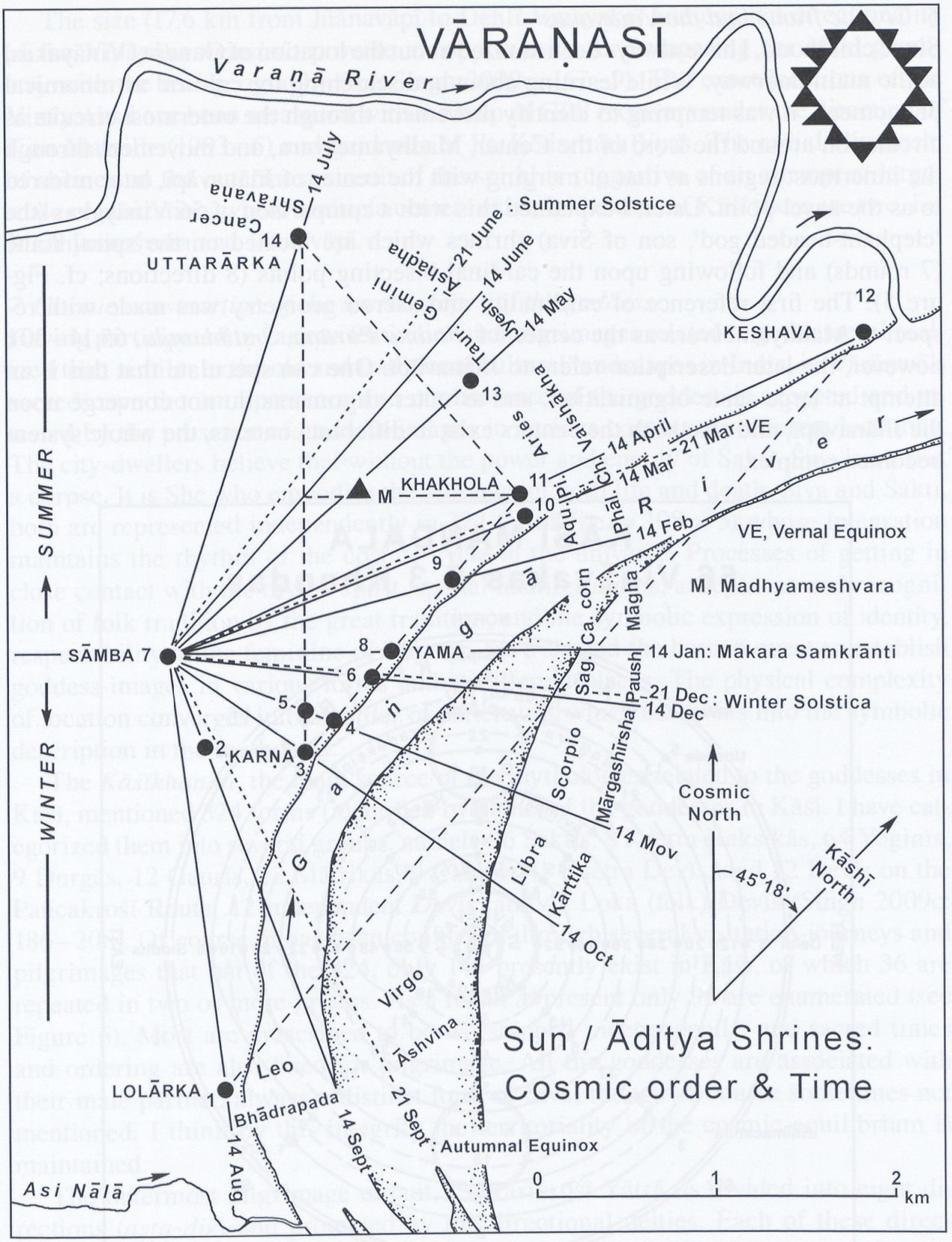

Fig. 4. Varāṇasī: The Sun temples and the alignments.

6. Cosmic frame and the Vināyakas

Since childhood, I have always been amazed about the location of Gaṇeśa (Vināyakas) at the main doorway. While learning about and searching for cultural astronomical phenomena, it was tempting to identify movement through the outermost circuits as circulation around the Lord of the Center, Madhyameśvara, and movement through the innermost regions as that of merging with the center of Jñānavāpī, later referred to as the navel-point. Later, I explained this with a comparison of 56 Vināyakas (the 'elephant-headed god', son of Śiva) shrines which are located on the spiral route (7 rounds) and following upon the cardinal bisecting points (8 directions; cf. Figure 5). The first reference of cardinality and sacred geometry was made with respect to Madhyameśvara as the center (cf. *Padma Purāṇa, Śṛṣtikhaṇḍa*, 65.14–20); however, the later description refers to Jñānavāpī. One can speculate that this is an attempt at large-scale organization, and as outer alignments do not converge upon the Jñānavāpī, and also both the centers exist in different contexts, the whole system becomes complex.

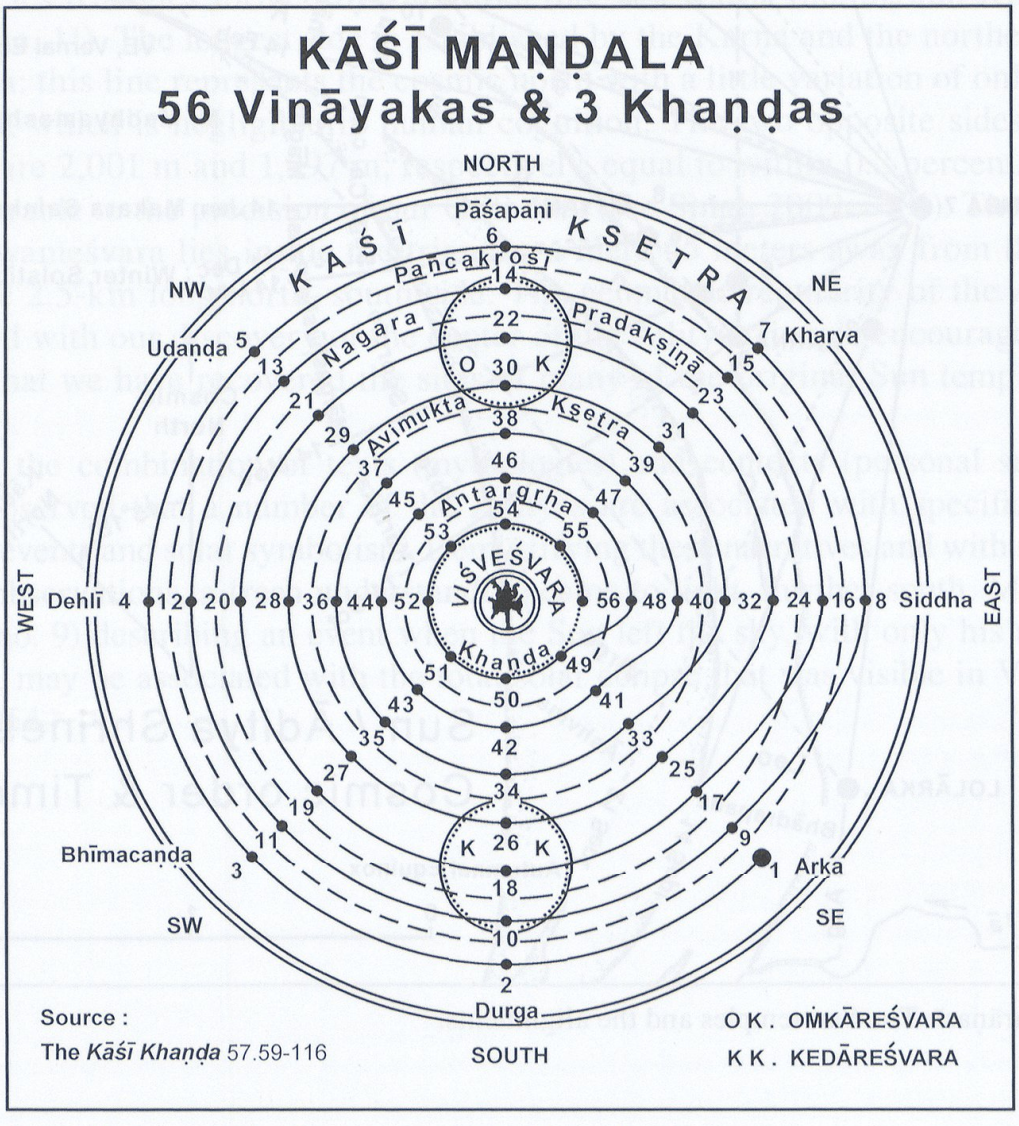

Fig. 5. Vārāṇasī: The alignments of the Vināyaka shrines.

The size (17.6 km from Jñānavāpī to Dehlī Vināyaka) and explicit directionality of the Vināyaka *maṇḍala* provide an opportunity for comparing the ideal geometry with the real geography (see Singh 2009c: 167–9). The exact locations of the Vināyakas have been measured with the help of GPS receivers under the direction of Kim Malville (1993–6) and guidance of Pt. Kedarnath Vyas. The radial alignment of shrines on the outermost circuit of the spiral is suggestive of an attempt at large-scale organization, where multiple centers exist; in the case of Kāśī there are two, i.e. Madhyameśvara and Jñānavāpī.

7. Cosmic construction of the sacredscapes of the goddess

Having participated in various festivities and pilgrimages related to goddesses, I realized that, similar to the old and traditional cultural landscapes in India, in Vārāṇasī's sacredscape the omnipresence and omniscience of the goddess is accepted and attested by the presence of goddess-images in various contexts at different locations. The city-dwellers believe that without the power and energy of Śakti, Śiva is a *śava*, a corpse. It is She who embodies the vibrancy of both life and death. Śiva and Śakti, both are represented independently in 324 forms (i.e. = 108 × 3) whose integration maintains the rhythm of the cosmic cycle in the universe. Processes of getting in close contact with the divine spirit, spatial manifestations, acceptance and recognition of folk tradition by the great tradition, and the symbolic expression of identity, respectability of the feminine divine, etc. have shaped the human quest to establish goddess-images in various forms and at different places. The physical complexity of location converges into an order of patterning, which easily fits into the symbolic description in the mythology.

The *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*, the main source of the mythologies related to the goddesses in Kāśī, mentioned 324 forms (identified by name) of the goddesses in Kāśī. I have categorized them into several groups, namely 96 Śaktis, 8 Kṣetra-Rakṣikās, 64 Yoginīs, 9 Durgās, 12 Gaurīs, 12 Mātrikās, 9 Caṇḍīs, 41 Kṣetra Devīs, and 12 Devīs on the Pañcakrośī Route, 12 independent Devīs, and 42 Loka (folk) Devīs (Singh 2009c: 186–208). Of course, it has been confirmed through several visitation-journeys and pilgrimages that out of the 324, only 144 presently exist in Kāśī, of which 36 are repeated in two or more groups. As a result at present only 96 are enumerated (see Figure 6). Most are prescribed to be worshipped independently, and sacred times and ordering are also fixed for pilgrimage. All the goddesses are associated with their male partner, always a distinct form of Śiva, though of course sometimes not mentioned. I think by this integrity the territoriality of the cosmic equilibrium is maintained.

The outermost pilgrimage circuit, Caurāsīkrośī Yātrā, is divided into eight directions (*aṣṭa-dik*) and protected by the directional deities. Each of these directions is regulated and controlled by goddesses of the cycle of time (i.e. 12 zodiacs/12 months), called Śaktis ('power goddesses'), thus their number reaches to 96 (i.e. 8 × 12). With the help of a topographical map I found that it covers a circumference of 184 miles/296 km, and symbolizes the circumambulation of the cosmos.

While this journey had rarely been performed, over the last few years it has been revived, although only in parts. This is further substantiated by my fieldwork and pilgrimages.

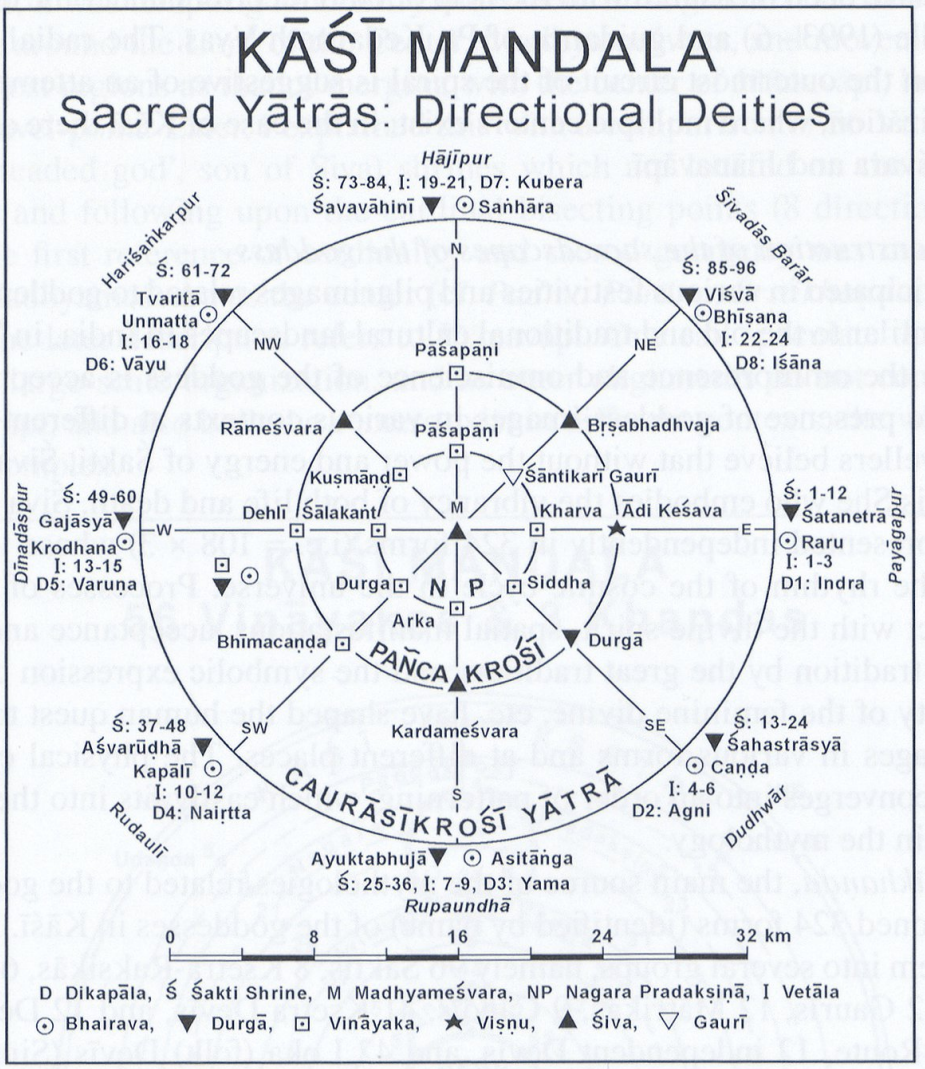

Fig. 6. Kāśī Maṇḍala: Sacred Yātrās, Directional Deities and Śakti shrines

With the help of Pt. Kuberanath Sukul I discovered that the location of shrines and deities along the sacred route is depicted over a cognitive pilgrimage map as *maṇḍala* prepared by his grandfather Pt. Kailashanath Sukul in CE 1875. Of course, many of these goddesses and their shrines are described in different contexts too; their full and systematic listing is given in the KKh (72.3–13 and 97–9). This can be compared with the generalized *maṇḍalic* map that I developed (see Figure 6) which shows positive correspondence.

8. Vision of the sacred: images of Kāśī in ancient literature

I find that in Hindu tradition places such as special sites or natural locations, rivers, mountains, grounds, sacred buildings, and sacred cities replicate the form and process of the cosmos, as illustrated in the symbolic descriptions that I have represented

in the form of sketches inspired by an inner quest. In fact, a passion for placement is basic to Hindu thought. The sacred place as a 'storied place' is praised in Hindu mythology and oral epics, with divine connotations of the intersection of myth and *terra firma*.

From a review of the literature I found that the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa* of the *Skanda Purāṇa* describes the territorial form of the sacred city as it was in the four mythic eras (*yugas* in Hindi cosmology). Thus, the shape of Kāśī was like a trident (*triśula*) in Kṛta/Satya (an era of 1,728,000 years), a disc (*cakra*) in Tretā (1,296,000 years), a chariot (*ratha*) in Dvāpara (864,000 years), and a conchshell (*Śaṅkha*) in Kali (432,000 years). These four forms clearly indicate stages of population and territorial growth through the sites of various shrines (Figure 7).

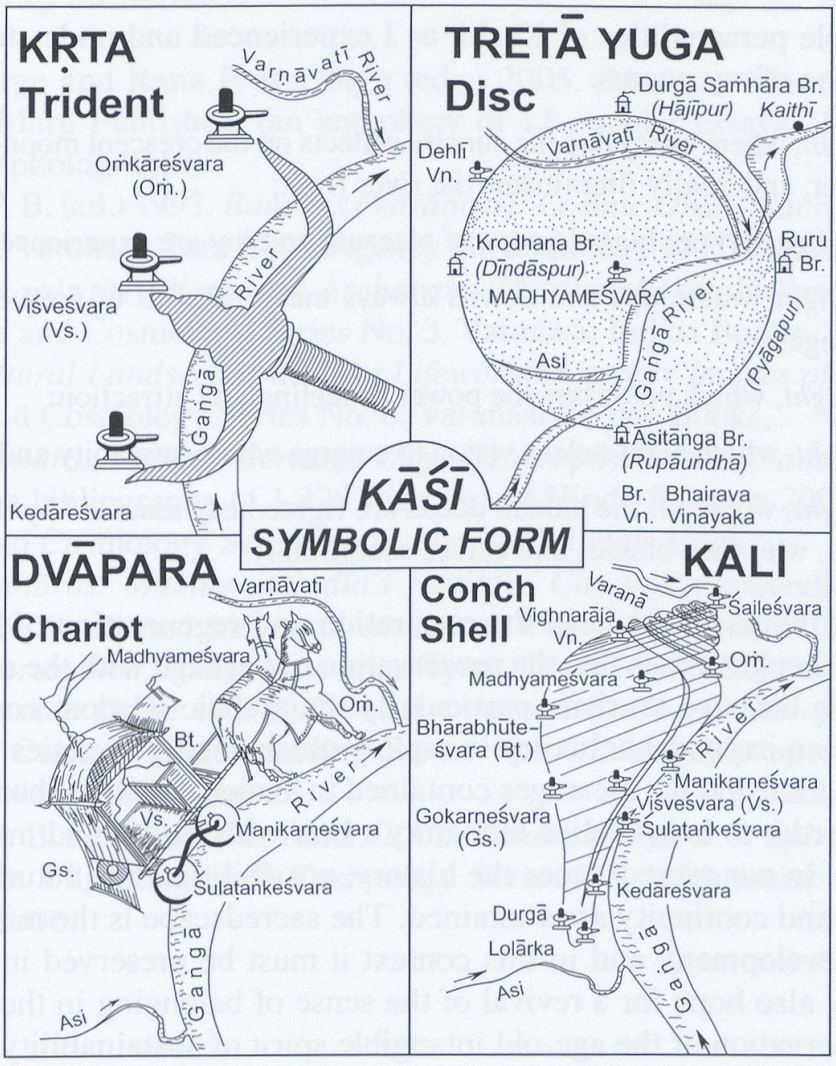

Fig. 7. Kāśī: The Symbolic Forms

9. An epilogue and nearness to destination

Over the course of about four decades, I came to understand that local mythologies (*sthalapurāṇas*) are superimposed to justify the historicity and religious merit, and after the passage of time it finally became part of the contemporary tradition. Fur-

ther, in the chain of 'existence–maintenance–continuity' the superimposition of the various divinities took place in the long span of history, a process that is ongoing even today and also is an impartial part of popular tradition. One can easily see a variety of images in different forms in most of the temples, at road-crossings, river/stream bridges, and shrines, from the omnipresent form for general well-being to the terrible or specific form worshipped for particular purposes.

As noted, during the eleventh to the seventeenth centuries Muslim invaders destroyed the city at least three times. However, it survived and was repeatedly revived; the sites and holy spots were sought out again, the monuments were repaired and rebuilt, and the spirit was again reawakened to reunite with the primordial. In this way the eternity of life has survived in spite of several 'superimpositions' or attempts to submerge it.

The multiple personalities of Kashi, as I experienced and understood them, are projected in one of my poems:

> *City of light*, where every day the sunrise reflects on the crescent moon-shaped Ganga River, and finally illuminates the river front;
>
> *City of delight*, where high degrees of pleasure and joy are experienced;
>
> *City of plight*, where ups and downs always make life full of frequent and sudden changes;
>
> *City of might*, which possesses the power of feeling and attraction;
>
> *City of sight*, which allows clear vision to emerge where humanity and divinity meet;
>
> *City of right*, where all the human deeds are righteously assessed by the patron deity Śiva, who then blesses and curses accordingly.

Working over the past decade in the restoration and regeneration of heritage sites, I felt a line of thought exists that the preservation of heritage with the aim of promoting sustainable heritage tourism, particularly the archaic wisdom contained in sacredscapes, is an expendable luxury in rapidly modernizing societies such as India. But modernization and the messages contained in ancient wisdom should be allowed to coexist in order to help realize humanity's link with nature and maintain the vibrancy of life. In our sacredscapes the history, possibilities, and future prospects of our existence and continuity are contained. The sacredscape is the mirror of human growth and development, and in this context it must be preserved in a sustainable way. One may also hope for a revival of the sense of belonging in the light of 'eco-ethics,' a preservation of the age-old intangible spirit of sustainability, and recognition of our identity in the context of heritage sites.

Let me express what I experienced and in a way revealed too. A spiritual walk is the ladder, the sacred ways are the steps, and human understanding is the destination. Thinking together is a new vision. Going together is a new start. Walking together is a real march. Realizing together is the final destination – enlightenment/revelation. Through a spiritual walk, can we regain what we once understood but have now

forgotten? Why not? What we once understood would help us to a certain extent regain our balance inwardly (spiritually and psychologically) and outwardly in terms of ecological cosmology. It is our wish that you and I will either meet in the lanes of Banāras, or, even better, that we will undertake a copilgrimage in and around Banāras, walking on the cosmic circuit in search of revelation and deeper understanding where humanity meets divinity (see Singh and Rana 2002/2006). I realized that the rituals and social actions, while no doubt at the core of continuity and the maintenance of locality, nevertheless possess inherently the message of universality.

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Banāras – City of Sound: Reflections on the aesthetics of religion and spaces of cultural perception

Annette Wilke

The Banāras conference ventured an innovative approach within the field of Indology and the study of religions by requesting the contributors to present not only their recent research, but also share personal views on how their stay in Vārāṇasī was formative for their research, including methodology and method. In my case it was indeed formative, in fact from the first day onwards. It was in the early 1990s when I had a scholarship at the Banāras Hindu University (BHU)[1] that was my first time in India. Luckily I found myself at a pleasant guesthouse at Assī Ghāṭ where I spent a week or two before moving to a Brahmin family at Assī. The first week of my stay was already a kind of initiation – a revelation of the rich performance culture of India and its sensory aesthetics. My days started with hearing loud chanting from the loudspeakers of a nearby ashram, which penetrated to the very marrow. I did little more than sit on the balcony of the guesthouse, partly because I was scared of the crowded roads, but primarily because I was so overwhelmed, confused, and fascinated by the many sights, sounds, colors, and smells at Assī Ghāṭ. I remember well early in the morning of the second day watching women do their *pūjā* at the different shrines, taking out petals and powders from their plastic baskets, lighting camphor and waving incense sticks in front of the icon, and moving quickly to the next wayside shrine to repeat their worship. It appeared to me their actions were a natural part of their daily routine, like brushing their teeth or buying vegetables, and it was a religious style completely different from that of the Advaita Vedānta *bhāṣya*s of Śaṅkara which I had studied exhaustively up to this point and which had shaped my mental map of India.

At that time, I did not yet know the profound changes in my research that the stay in Banāras would trigger off – with regard to both contents and methods. My initial plan to study the apocryphal Śaṅkara tradition for a doctoral thesis turned

1 I am grateful to the Government of India for having granted the scholarship (Reciprocal Scholarship Scheme) during the years 1991–2 and also to the society of Swiss female academics for extra allowance. I want to thank Prof. Mishra, my supervisor at the BHU, for his ever helpful support, and also Prof. Tripathi who introduced me into texts of the non-dual Kashmir Śaivism. Moreover, I had the great chance to study with Pandit Hemendra Chakṛavarti part of Lakṣmīdhara's famous commentary of the *Saundaryalaharī* (a goddess hymn of the Śrīvidyā lore ascribed to Śaṅkara) and Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Lalitātriśati*. I express my particular gratitude to him.

into various post-doctoral projects that extend to the present day. Little was I aware initially how far my stay would lead me into the devotional *stotra* and *sahasranāma* traditions, goddess worship and Tantric studies, particularly the Śrīvidyā – the right-handed and later the left-handed one, both of which left traces in Vārāṇasī. Various forms of goddess worship occupied my academic attention from the first days in the city onwards. When arriving I was annoyed to find the doors of the BHU closed and nobody working, but I indeed rejoiced in the reason: it was holiday time because of Durgāpūjā. I watched the quiet preparations of installing colorful *paṇḍāl*s, the lonely *mantra* consecrations of the clay images, the reading of the Durgā myth in goddess temples, and the swelling crowds and dense festival atmosphere during the last three nights with continuous worship, prayer, song, and dance. Later on, the more traditional way to celebrate Navarātrī in Vārāṇasī by visiting a specific Devī temple on each of the nine days became a research topic (Wilke 2006).

To cut a long story short: the two years of scholarship in Vārāṇasī and the succeeding fieldwork in the city and beyond (particularly in Tamil Nadu) expanded and changed my whole approach to the study of Hinduism – and religion in general. I made a move from mere textual studies and Advaita Vedānta philosophy to ritual studies, Tantra, and fieldwork in the living popular religion, in particular goddess worship. It also impacted on my approach to method and theory and sharpened my sense for the necessity of cultural hermeneutics, i.e. looking at the whole of culture and not forgetting the material and sensory expressions of religion, and instead of merely studying texts and teachings being open to vastly different ways of living and understanding the world. Increasingly, 'ethno-Indology' became a favored research method, a combination (and comparison) of text-based philological-historical research and fieldwork studies, and participant observation of present-day religious life. In the last decade also the 'aesthetics of religion' have become a prominent research area. This approach emerged in the late 1990s in Germany among a group of scholars of religion as a powerful new paradigm by which to analyze religions.[2] It is concerned with everything about religion that can be perceived by the senses as well as the whole range of religious media and symbolic representation, focusing on spaces of perception, the sensory mediation of religious ideas, and the cultural hierarchies of perception.

Hindu traditions are particularly rich in multi-sensory representation and the synaesthetic experience of religion. My first days in Banāras made me very aware of this fact and set the track for my future studies. Diane Eck's *Darśan* (1981) and *Banāras – City of Light* (1982) focused primarily on visual culture. However, it was not only visuality and synaesthetics which I found very pronounced, but also the spoken word and how it sounds. The dominance of phonocentric communication systems and sonic perception spaces has a long history. A rich ritual and textual

2 A primary research survey is to be found in Wilke 2008. See also Meyer and Verrips 2008, who suggest sensory-aesthetic mediation to be the most fundamental issue in accessing religion and religious experience.

tradition reflecting this in ever new ways is found everywhere in India. I wish to present some of the major theses and themes of my latest monograph *Sound and Communication: An Aesthetic Cultural History of Sanskrit Hinduism*, co-authored by the Sanskritist and musician Oliver Moebus.[3] In mapping Sanskrit Hinduism as a highly sound-based culture, it was our hope to make a productive contribution to the understanding of other cultures and the mediating of Brahmanic Indian and Eurocentric views of the world. Incidentally, my co-author was also living and studying for some time in Vārāṇasī, so it is not by chance that we start therefore with the mapping of the soundscape of the sacred city – which in turn inspired the title of this article *Banāras – City of Sound*. My major objectives, however, will be the methodology and method and the presentation of some basic ideas in a book of more than a thousand pages, which goes far beyond studies of Banāras. In this treatise on text, communication, and sound we propose a new way of accessing Indian cultural history and an expanded method of interpreting text. While doing so we exemplify the field of aesthetics of religion and explore sonic perception in religious contexts and beyond. Thus the condensed presentation in this article covers four parts and a summary:

1. the data: the sonic cosmos of Vārāṇasī and Hinduism as a culture of sound;
2. the consequences: methodology and method of studying Sanskrit texts;
3. the theory: an applied aesthetics of religion;
4. an example of sonic worldviews: the *mantra* contemplation of the Śrīvidyā scholar Bhāskararāya in seventeenth-century Banāras; and
5. a summary: eight theses for the study of Sanskrit Hinduism.

The sonic cosmos of Vārāṇasī and Hinduism as a culture of sound

For many an age Banāras has been a cosmos of Indian religions – it owes its fame as 'the' sacred city of Hinduism partly to this fact. The attraction for pilgrims, tourists, and students of Hinduism is largely due to its traditionalism and legendary holiness. However, they will probably all experience Vārāṇasī also as a cosmos of profane and sacred sounds as described in the initial paragraph of *Sound and Communication*:

> If you visit the holy city of Banāras you will not need an alarm clock to get up early in the morning. It is quite sufficient to take a lodging close to the Mumukshu Bhavan, between Assi Ghat and Lanka. At 5 a.m. precisely, any chance of sleep is dispelled by the loud calls of 'Rām Rām Rām' emanating from the loudspeakers of the Ashram, and for the next half hour a man's voice enthusiastically sings God's praise, while no-one in the vicinity can possibly get away from the sound. Should you step out onto the Lanka Road after breakfast, you will witness another pan-Hinduistic phenomenon. Even if the roads are not completely blocked with the usual congestion, the cars drive through the streets sounding their horns, and as for the numerous cyclists, you would

3 Wilke and Moebus 2011. Unfortunately, Moebus had to cease working on the project a few years before the book took on its present form.

> be forgiven for thinking that Indian bicycles were powered solely by their bells. Even Indian street life appears to prove the widespread Tantric philosopheme of the connection between sound and cosmic Dynamis. In the alleys that have hitherto been quiet in the district of Godawlia, the traders have now appeared. Just like birds in the forest, they mark out their territories with long, drawn-out and piercing calls and try to attract custom by means of constantly repeated calls such as 'steeeeel plate.' … Religious sounds, too, are not limited to the early morning, but also occur throughout the day … [I leave out the day] … If finally you take a walk at dusk, when the streets have become quieter again, to the ghats along the banks of the Ganges, or through the narrow alleyways of the town center, it will not take long to find a temple, for you will certainly hear one before you see it. The intense ringing of bells announces the evening ritual and even more vigorous bell ringing, small gongs, hand-drums and cymbals mark its climax. After sunset loudspeakers start to broadcast religious singing, or else groups gather spontaneously in the temples to enthusiastically and unceasingly intone 'Rāma Rāja jay Sītā Rām' to a simple melody, accompanied by the sounds of cymbals and a harmonium. At 10 p.m. quietness descends … However, it is quite possible that a pious neighbor will be fulfilling an oath by intoning the call 'Rām Rām Sīyā Rām' at regular intervals throughout the night … A single day in India illustrates just how much a cosmos of sounds pervades the whole of everyday activity and religious life. (Wilke and Moebus, 2011: 1–2)

There is some justification in calling Hindu India a highly sound-based culture. And this goes back to the Veda, which was transmitted merely as an oral canon through the centuries, and has remained the very paradigm of sacred sound even in modern-day Bollywood movies. But the high valuation put on the spoken and sounding word did not stop with the Veda. It extended into post-Vedic sacred scriptures that were written down. Hinduism – in all its manifold and diverse regional and 'sectarian' strands – has always been a performance culture, where the holy literatures are 'sounded out' and embodied, i.e. recited, sung, staged, played, and danced. This feature had an amazing constancy until the present day. Every Banāras scholar will concede that the cult of Rām, so widespread in northern India, lives almost exclusively in sound rituals, recitatives, and texts performed for the senses – from the uninterrupted repetition of the god's name, 'Rām Rām,' to Rām songs (*bhajan*) in simple rhythms, to public recitation and dramatic performances of the vernacular epic *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsīdās. Above all, in the devotional traditions of *bhakti* ('loving participation') with its emphasis on emotional religiosity, music plays a central role. These traditions have often drawn on the vernacular and not standard Sanskrit. *Sound and Communication* deals only with Sanskrit culture and this is doubtless a restriction of the topic. However, the restriction is well-founded, since it is precisely Sanskrit Hinduism that provides the richest source of material on language and sound. We find a very extensive spectrum of recited and sung sacred texts dating from earliest times.

It is important to be aware that both orality *and* sonality have enjoyed great cultural significance and this has had a distinct influence on how people approach

texts and how texts are composed – in metric forms, using alliterations, etc. Texts are primarily there to be heard, even when they are written down, and readings are performances. Unlike in modern Europe, sacred texts are hardly ever 'read' in our sense, i.e. received purely mentally, nor are they read out in a normal, everyday voice. Even if a text is not sung, the 'reading' is always a semi-musical recitation, a *pāṭha*. 'Reading' out a religious text in Sanskrit means 'reciting' it in a musically pleasing way and often with the utmost care regarding correct pronunciation.[4] In turn, simply listening to the sound of a religious text is held already to be auspicious and purifying. Therefore semantics may not even be the primary issue. Texts are always also sound events, and sometimes the sonic aspect is more important than the meaning.

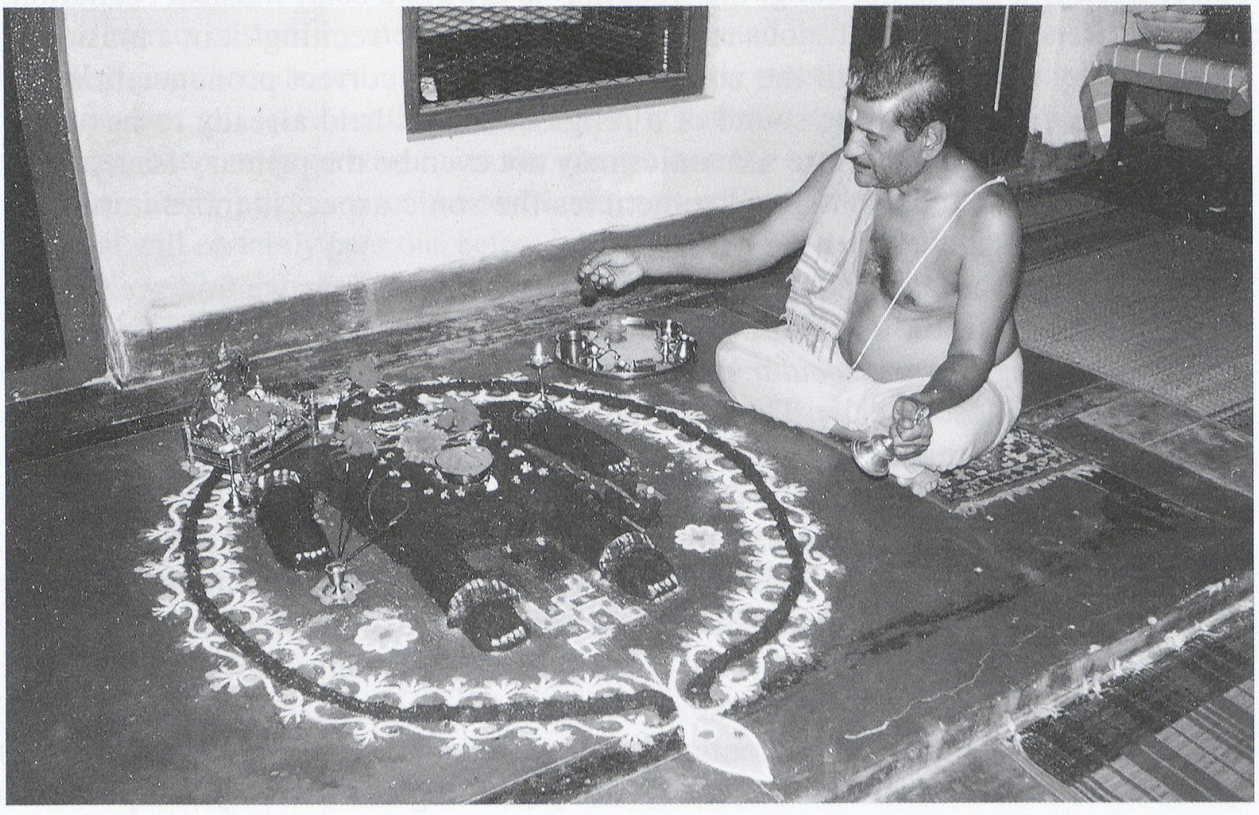
Not only in everyday life, but also in the scholarly traditions we find great focus on the sonic dimension. There are not only complete sound rites, but also an exceptionally rich religious *and secular* literature that uses language and sound poetically and reflects it philosophically. The importance of sound and its perception has led to rites, models of cosmic order, and abstract formulas, and sound serves both to stimulate religious feelings and to give them a sensory form and embody them. This preoccupation with language and sound generated hyperbolic symbolic forms such as the Tantric *mantra* deities, as well as highly sophisticated scientific linguistics which anticipated modern Western studies. The definition of a 'word' (*śabda*) in popular and scholarly discourse includes very consciously the phonetic aspect: a word is a sound to which meaning is attached.

It is noteworthy that the predominance of sensing the world through sounds in Hindu India and Sanskrit culture is not confined to religious life only, but pervades even the most complex symbolic representations in the arts and sciences.[5] Sound may function as an organizing principle in such abstract conceptualizations as are found in grammar, mathematics, and astronomy. At the core of Pāṇini's ingenious grammar lie certain sound codes that rearrange the Sanskrit alphabet. The sonic paradigm expressed and trained in this case formalistic thought. Pāṇini's algebra-like sonic formulas constitute a meta-language that regulates all grammatical operations. The alphabet being structured according to the corporal places of articulation in a strictly phonetic and highly rational order inspired likewise the numeric code systems used by astronomers. Instead of conspectuses and diagrams we find sound codes, memorizing systems, and poetic verses full of alliterations. This ensured easier memorization and also a more emotive incorporation of the abstract subjects by giving them a sensory and pleasing form. Here we observe scientific styles completely different to those of Western culture and having a stronger aesthetic appeal. The same predominance of sound is also seen in metaphysics where sound becomes a means of interpreting and understanding the world. The sophisticated cosmologies

4 This is very much like Quran recitation. On comparative perspectives see Wilke and Moebus 2011: ix, 130–79.

5 On the following aspects see Wilke and Moebus 2011: 225–50, 477–92.

of the Āgamas and Tantras are based moreover on the letters of the alphabet – which are not only written signs, but rather mysterious sound codes serving as models to explain the coming about of the world and physical language. Writing in India often even reinforced the sonic paradigm.



Govardhan-Pūjā in a Brahmin Family, Assī

From all this, a first important conclusion can be drawn. In spite of a great literary tradition, Hindu India is not a 'book culture' and Hinduism not a 'book religion.' Although in modern times there have been efforts to convert it into one, a predilection for the spoken and sounding word continues. The performative-sensory approach to text generated as the most important communication channels memorizing, recital, public readings, ritual staging, devotional song, dramatic performance, and oral transmission from teacher to disciple. It had an impact on habitus forms, on cognition and emotion, and also inspired a deep reflexive concern with language and sound that led to highly developed linguistics at an early age. It generated quite special symbolic forms – metonymic-mythical forms like the goddess speech and highly abstract and scientific forms like Pāṇini's sonic meta-language. Naturally, this sensing of the world through sounds also left traces on the perceiving of the world as a whole and the divine sphere transcending the world. It shaped the ways of world-making and was a good 'biotope' for holistic worldviews. To mention only one of the most striking examples, the 'Sound-Brahman' (Nāda-Brahman) of the thirteenth-century musicologist Śārṅgadeva: He argued that the whole world is pervaded by sound and held music to be a pleasant form of yoga for everybody.

The consequences: methodology and method of studying Sanskrit texts

The highly oral dimension of Hindu traditions has been observed increasingly in recent times by a number of scholars, but the sonic dimension and a life full of sounds and its impact on perceiving the world and the divine has not been given the systematic credit it deserves. It is true that Guy Beck's *Sonic Theology* (1993) leans in this direction. His book contains a relevant and rich collection of material. Many of the examples are also to be found in *Sound and Communication*, but unlike Beck, the historical material is set in a broader contextual framework, and questions congruent with cultural studies are tackled, such as the historical fluidity of texts, the meaning of rituals, the forms of verbal and non-verbal communication, and culture-specific aspects of basic world orientations and hierarchies of perception.

In spite of recent Indologists' attention to the unparalleled focus on orality in the transmission of the Veda in particular and in Sanskrit scholarship in general, still no methodological and methodical consequences have been drawn for the actual study of texts. Access to texts remains non-sensory and poorly sensitive to sound. There has been a concentration on the literary sources and their semantic content, although archaeological sources and depictions have also been used. This hierarchizing of the media corresponds exactly to Western expectations. However, anyone attempting to understand Hinduism solely through philology, epigraphy, archaeology, and art history will miss out on precisely those media channels that are frequently the most central to the Hindus themselves. As a die-hard philologist one elects to forego an important source of information if one insists on reading their literary sources as books in the Western sense, i.e. only as discursive bodies of data without any audible form or any aesthetic effect. Texts cannot be stripped of their embodiment in sounds, voice, and performances. To include these sensuous aspects, *Sound and Communication* proposes an extended form of text hermeneutics. To give just one example of our method of working, it is certainly unusual to investigate the sung realization of a hymn to the beautiful goddess Lalitā as a framework for the interpretation of precisely this text. The medium belongs to the message, and sometimes also adds extra meaning to it. The approach is certainly not an indigenous one, but more compatible with the Indians' approach to their own texts than is the standard range of instruments for text critique classically prescribed by the European history of research. One could even say that the philologist's 'text' does not exist as a text type in the Indian tradition. In the past this tradition never resulted in 'texts just for reading,' but always attached great importance to a careful audible realization, and was often also very sensitive to the emotive content of texts and the communication of moods.

It is therefore preferable to speak of 'audible texts' rather than 'oral literature,' and there is a need to distinguish orality and sonality for three reasons. The first is the coexistence of writing and orality. In Indological studies the apparent orality has sometimes been overemphasized. One may debate the acquaintance with and the role of writing in the very early literature. But at least from Pāṇini (fifth to fourth century BC) onwards the Brahminical tradition has probably always used a com-

bination of oral and written transmission systems.[6] While there was a tendency to memorize the Veda even to the exclusion of scriptualization, there was no restriction on writing down secondary and post-Vedic texts – and yet the spoken and audible word retained primacy. As a rule of thumb one could say that the more sacred a text, the more the need was felt to memorize it and to transmit it orally. But we should not forget that Sanskrit Hinduism has been a highly literate culture. It does not represent an oral culture in the strict sense. We find instead a complex coexistence of written and oral forms of expression, with an exceptionally strong inclination to oral-aural communication systems. Writing and the introduction of book printing and binding did not have the sweeping effects found in European culture.

The second reason to prefer sonality is that orality is too exclusive in referring only to transmission, while sound connotes also the sensory emotive aspects and the expressivity of literary production. Not only is the spoken word important, but also the sounding word and the media of the voice, and this has left its mark on perception and social practices. Among other things, 'acoustic piety' is very widely spread, comprising religious forms in which the act of recitation itself or the devotional attitude come first, whereas the semantic meaning is not necessarily important or known. Rather, practitioners may see the religious text as an icon of the divine charged with special power, an animate reality. The popular knowledge that hearing is already purifying and auspicious is in fact rooted in sophisticated theologies. When I speak of 'sonic culture,' this refers to a phonocentric life-world that exhibited special forms of practice, habitus and conceptions (and still does today), and also stimulated linguistic, poetic, philosophical and theological reflection. Sonality encapsulates better these cognitive and epistemic aspects – from sophisticated linguistics to sacralizing tendencies, all the way to a deification of language and cosmologically hypostasized sound.

The latter refer to a third reason why sonality has its own domains of sense extending orality. Sonic awareness obviously left traces on the perception and interpretation of the universe and that which transcends daily life. There have been very many symbolic forms centering on sound that express religious ideas, worldviews and the comprehension of the divine, ranging from the Vedic 'Goddess Speech' to the Lord God Śiva who created the world through the rhythms of his hand-drum and dance.

Both the persistence of the spoken and sounding word and the expressive and reflexive evidence on language and sound indicate the great value of sonality in the hierarchy of perception through the centuries and across different bodies of texts, ritual performances, and knowledge cultures. The research design of *Sound and Communication* therefore combines a historical long-term perspective with questions of cultural theory and historical anthropology. Of guiding interest was the question: what are a culture's vision(s) and interpretation(s) of the world like, when the culture is so strongly characterized by the spoken language and sound perception? And also: what negotiation processes and transformations have they been subject to and, in

6 For arguments on this view see Wilke and Moebus, op. cit., pp. 11 fn. 27, 191–7.

view of all the historical changes, how can the persistence of live communication systems be explained? The thesis is that sound is one of the key media of cultural representation and reproduction, and thus a key to Indian culture and to Sanskrit Hinduism in particular. A 'sonic cultural history' therefore promises to expose ongoing themes and common patterns in a highly diversified culture and at the same time to record diversity and socio-religious change in a cultural continuum.

An applied aesthetics of religion

> For far too long, religion has been equated with doctrine, especially with those systematized doctrines known as 'theologies' … in many cases disregarding the lived, physical, components of those traditions.[7]

These words summarize well the starting point of the research program of 'Aesthetics of Religion.' The term 'aesthetics' is somewhat misleading if one starts from a modern, Western everyday comprehension of aesthetics relating to art and beauty. The aesthetics of religion relates to an older tradition, the Greek *aisthesis*, which refers to any sensory perception. This approach is based on the insight that religions create networks of relationships between heaven and earth, not only through doctrines, but also via visual, acoustic, motoric, and rhetorical media, and affective ties. The focus on the sensory dimension does not exclude cognition, as all sensory perception is not just a natural representation of things out there, but coded by our cultural knowledge systems and interpretations of the world. Perception is always culturally determined. So sound, for instance, may be of great religious significance in one culture – such as India – whereas in another culture it is not. Religious spaces of perception can vastly differ. An increase in or reduction of stimuli will have an impact on different kinds of sensory and bodily awareness. This is why the aesthetics of religion pays very close attention to expressive media, symbolic forms, and cultural hierarchies of perception. If language and sound in India are deified, we find an essential idea of the modern academic aesthetics of religion put into practice: the ability of physical and material media to communicate immaterial things.

A key aspect of the religious aesthetics approach is the recognition that religions – if they be social facts – need materialization, embodiment, and sensualization to have lasting effects, to touch, and to bind. Such materializations may be rites, texts, religious images, buildings, dress codes, etc. In such sensory media there is a special force creating bodily knowledge of religion to stimulate the senses, imagination, and feelings. They invoke motivations and collective thought patterns, and also discipline and channel behavior. It is essential that religious ideas are not limited solely to internal knowledge, nor are they merely subjective. They must form a collective knowledge to be socially effective. Religious concepts are effective only as 'social facts' and must consequently be communicated and staged. It is necessary

7 Thomassen and Benavides 2007: 371 (Foreword by the editors of this special volume). The present chapter on aesthetics is based on Wilke and Moebus 2011: 25–38.

that religious symbols and their meanings can be perceived and experienced so that they can exert their social effects as regulatory systems with worldviews providing sense. The translation of ideas, values and concepts into perceptible forms is therefore a constitutive element for establishing public space for perceiving the religious and creating social effervescence. The inclusion of the aesthetic dimension when studying religion is particularly important regarding a culture so strongly oriented on performance and sonic awareness as Sanskrit Hinduism.

Govardhan-Pūjā of women in the neighbourhood of Laṅkā crossing

Sound and Communication may be called an inductively developed and applied aesthetics of religion. We started with experiences in the field and text studies, and this resulted in a way of accessing religion as theoretically required by the aesthetics of religion. At the same time, the study introduces a correction. Due to the strong criticism of mere textual study, the aesthetics of religion initially paid little attention to texts and more to the non-verbal means and material and visual culture. However, texts also have a material aspect and exert their impact not only via content, but also to a great extent via their embodiment in rites and their physical presence in sounds. Therefore texts can also be seen as a source of data on people's use of the senses and as a key to culturally determined perception. It was important to *Sound and Communication* to include not only evidence from the educated elites, but also popularizations, folk narratives, and religious everyday practice.

Texts remain vital for the study of religions. They are not static entities with a fixed meaning, nor is their meaning exhausted in their semantic sense. This ap-

plies particularly to religious texts. In libraries and the studies of academics they may well be the object of rational analysis, and when bound between the covers of a book they may suggest closed (or complete) systems. During transmission and reception, however, they are exceptionally fluid constructions, being the subject of cultural discourses and new codings, and when read out, they are aesthetic events. Language as expressive sound has its own independent validity of meaning, its own ability to communicate, and its own aura. It unfolds its effects not only in the sphere of the terminological and logical, but also in the sphere of the sensory and emotive. It is therefore necessary to focus on the event character of religious texts in a double sense: on the one hand relating to their potential ability to produce sense in an unfinished, ever new, fashion, and on the other relating to their aesthetic quality, i.e. audible physical nature.

Both aesthetics and fluidity are illustrated well as early as the Veda, the sonic paradigm par excellence and the most important 'myth' in the sense of a guiding cultural image. In previous studies Veda memorization was too often only viewed as a rule-governed activity. Books on phonetics, however, do not only communicate rules, but also use highly poetic metaphors to communicate the subtleties of recitation. Implicitly they communicate the Brahmins' love for their holy text and explicitly impart a tangible aesthetic-emotional flavor. In the wider sphere of culture, already the sound of the Veda imparts a meaning associated with one particular cultural 'habitus': when a Hindu hears the characteristic three intervals of a Veda performance, this transports him to the peaceful, pure, and strictly vegetarian world of ideal Brahminhood. At the same time, the Veda exhibits the fluidity of texts particularly well. Whereas the Vedic hymns were still evocative calls to the gods and magic poetry at the time that they were composed, in late Vedic times they became sacred language material in which one no longer tried to find a visionary meaning, but rather mysterious numeric combinations. In epic times, the mere recitation of the holy text acquired an importance equal to that of the late Vedic fire sacrifice. The *Rāmāyaṇa* depiction of the 'holy noise' (*brahma-ghoṣa*) of the resonant three-tone Veda recitation, as it emanates from the simple straw huts of modest-living Brahmins, already suggests completely the Vedic aura and solemn sacredness which even today is linked to Veda recitation. The Veda kept its sacred power although it has altered substantially in its reception over the course of time. One and the same text initially was understood as a 'normal semantic text,' then as an esoteric secret formula, and finally, in essence, as sacred sound substance.

More than anything else, the inherent validity of sounds, as expressed in phenomena such as the 'holy noise,' has left its mark on Indian understanding of texts even today. When in a South Indian temple, against a background of bells and the all-pervading notes from the *nādasvaram* (a reed pipe), the priests declaim whole telephone directories of numinous names from memory by calling on the temple deities using their traditional one hundred and eight or one thousand names, or when itinerant monks put themselves into a blissful trance by singing to their god Śiva 'praise, praise, praise' to the incessant chirruping sound of their *ektar*s

(one-stringed drone instruments), it becomes clear just how far the category 'text' stretches here. The total disappearance of language in music as we find in many of today's *bhakti* traditions, is merely one of the most radical forms in which the validity of sound is expressed.

The wide popularity of *mantra* practice illustrates perhaps most clearly that not only semantically comprehensible texts make up the textual lore of Hindu traditions, but also non-semantic sounds, even mere phonemes and the letters of the alphabet. This experiential field is hard to capture with merely formalistic theories like those of Frits Staal.[8] We have to take into account the cognitive and emotive associations and the highly symbolic value connected with the *mantra*s and Tantric alphabet rites. The idea of the alphabet as the 'mother of the universe' (*māṭṛkā*) and the sonic cosmologies of the Āgamas and Tantras do not only view the world as a structured cosmos, but also ground it in a pre-terminological language sphere, an energetic field of cosmic sound and light and a sphere where language and consciousness merge. The conception of four language levels (audible language, discursive thought, intuitive synthetic vision, and pure consciousness) outlines a field in which senses and spirit are not separated (as in Western aesthetics since Aristotle). Audible language and consciousness form an unbroken continuum. This central aspect of Tantric philosophy is not only conceptual, but a field that can be sensed and experienced, as I will show in the next chapter. In the Tantra and beyond, sound functioned as a natural holistic symbol and a perfect connector of exterior and interior space. It was a very powerful means of self-sacralization, direct access to the divine sphere, and embodied experience of the deity – be it by experimenting with sound resonance or simple *bhajan* singing. Some things suggest that the Indian predilection for holistic worldviews correlates directly with the sound-centered life-world and was promoted and intensified by the paradigm of sonic perception. In Sanskrit Hinduism, language and sound are among the most significant holistic symbols of non-duality and cosmic unity – a non-duality that can even be perceived in this case by the senses.

An example from Banāras: Bhāskararāya's sonic worldview

One of many examples of how non-duality can be perceived by the senses and realized in the body is found in Bhāskararāya's *Varivasyā Rahasya* (seventeenth–eighteenth centuries).[9] The Maharasthrian Brahmin who settled in Banāras is known as the most eminent Śrīvidyā commentator and theorist. His major treatise *Varivasyā Rahasya* deals in a very reflexive way with the school's root *mantra*, and also shows how it is used as a contemplative instrument. The treatise is an interesting source

8 Staal 1979: 2–22, and other publications of the author. For a critical discussion of his approach see Wilke and Moebus 2011: 61, 89–91, 98f., 222f., 280–5.

9 *Varivasyā-Rahasya and its commentary Prakāśa*, ed. Subrahmanya Sastri. Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1934. Despite its importance, the *Varivasyā Rahasya* has barely been subject to academic study and the auto-commentary has not been translated. All succeeding translations are taken from Wilke and Moebus 2011: 754–62, on which the text above is based.

on the creative ways to find ever new meaning in the non-semantic *mantras*' sounds. Bhāskararāya was well aware that language is effective in both its terminological, logical and meaning-bearing aspects and its sensory and emotive appeal and embodied presence. Sense takes place on a very great number of levels, both semantic and non-semantic. Bhāskararāya ultimately favors the non-semantic dimensions as many others did – from simple practitioners to scholarly interpreters. Bhāskararāya belonged to the latter.

There is a nice anecdote about this master of 'mantra science' (*mantra-śāstra*) who – in good Kaula-Tantra manner – apparently also knew how to appreciate a good glass of wine and a pretty girl in the ritual context, which of course is enough to horrify an orthodox Hindu. Bhāskararāya belonged to a Śrīvidyā strand wherein such practices were viewed as manifesting the bliss of Brahman in the body and wherein Vedic orthodoxy and Tantric heterodoxy were not conceived as opposites.[10] The anecdote[11] tells that the pandits of Banāras wanted to bring Bhāskararāya, who had been denounced for being a 'left-handed' Tantric, back onto the 'right path.' They involved him in a debate about the science of *mantras* to make a fool out of him and win him over to their ways, but Bhāskararāya countered all their arguments. Finally, a mendicant monk advised the pandits to give up, as it was going to be impossible to beat Bhāskararāya in a dispute because the goddess herself was speaking through his mouth. Naturally, the pandits did not believe a word. So the monk took some of the water that Bhāskararāya had used to bathe his image of the goddess and rubbed it on the eyes of the pandits' spokesman – and lo and behold, the man now saw the goddess sitting on Bhāskararāya shoulders and speaking out of his mouth.

This narrative tells something about rivalries within the pluralist religious field. It lends not only authority to a Tantric practitioner, but also communicates how much language is viewed as a source of authority, power, and creativity. The *Varivasyā Rahasya* is solely concerned with the Śrīvidyā *mantra* (Ka E Ī La HRĪṂ – Ha Sa Ka Ha La HRĪṂ – Sa Ka La HRĪṂ) and is known today as Bhāskararāya's most prominent work. He likely saw it himself that way, since he added an auto-commentary. The auto-commentary from the outset in Chapter One discusses sound cosmology and practice, while the main body of the text deals with the non-semantic *mantra* sounds in a deliberately polysemantic way – by working it into different backgrounds of thought, mystical analyses of the numbers, acrophonetic interpretations of the individual sounds, and building up a large number of semantic, etymological, symbolic, and literary relations for the threefold sound composition. In this way Bhāskararāya unifies the *mantra* not only with various Śaiva Tantra theologies, astrological numbers, and popular deities of his time, but also with the ritual part and the gnostic part of the Veda, and gives the impression that there is nothing that the *mantra* could not mean.

10 See *Paraśurāma-Kalpasūtra* 1.12, on which Bhāskararāya is believed to have written a commentary that is lost today.

11 Cf. Sastri's introduction to the *Varivasyā-Rahasya*, 18–19.

Alongside the quasi-semantic content given to the non-semantic *mantra* syllables, the first chapter of the auto-commentary emphasizes the yoga aspect of the Śrīvidyā *mantra*. The three groups of puzzle sounds (1. KaEĪLa; 2. HaSaKaHaLa; 3. SaKaLa) are the exoteric part of the mantra, and HRĪṂ is the esoteric part. During actual recitation the last HRĪṂ functions as a gateway to transcendency. Here the nasalized final sound of Candrabindu/Anusvāra – just like all seed *mantra*s that are terminally nasalized – has more or less the same psycho-acoustic effect as the reverberations of a gong or a church bell. The vibrating continuation of the note after it has been struck keeps it present psychologically, even though it has already stopped ringing out. Obviously as a result of his own *mantra* practice and in the manner of a natural scientist, Bhāskararāya divides up the nasal sound of the final HRĪṂ into nine distinguishable graded vibrations, i.e. increasingly subtle after-sounds, which continue successively via the crown of the head, and thus beyond the physical body: *bindu* (1) (forehead), *ardhacandra* (2), *rodhinī* (3), *nāda* (4), *nādānta* (5), *śakti* (6), *vyāpikā* (7), *samanā* (8) (fontanelle at the crown), *unmanā* (9) (above the crown in the thousand-petaled lotus). These nine phases of the reverberation of the *mantra*, which are all termed 'pure' sound (*nāda*, *śuddha-nāda*), become shorter and shorter in terms of time and more and more intangible in terms of their sound quality – the penultimate sound in this series is no longer than 1/256 *mātrā*, which corresponds to about 4 milliseconds. The last sound, *unmanā*, lasts for no time at all. *Unmanā* can be translated as 'going beyond (actual) thought,'[12] 'trance' or 'ecstasy.' Here the practitioner experiences something like timelessness, since in this state cognition of time phenomenologically ceases to exist at all and he genuinely experiences a moment of eternity. So contemplation of the mantra is about sensory experience of eternity within the temporal and abolishing the temporal by transforming it into eternity.

The Tantric interpretation of this technique and its psychological effects are very closely related to ontology and cosmogony: by following up the sound resonances one reverses the creational process and arrives at the source of everything. The sonic theory of world emanation is not only a cognitive model, but also something that can be 'felt' via the senses and the body. Contemplative recitation of the *mantra* that is assimilated into one's own body returns language to its virtual pre-creational state, and at the same time language continues to be experienced as manifest. We find a central principle of philosophical mystic Tantrism being applied here: that which appears in the world in manifold form is a unity within the deity – and yogic *mantra* practice can make this mystery accessible through experience.

Bhāskararāya deals with this experiential dimension in a highly reflexive way by building on the axiom of four language levels. The main point of argumentation is that all the preceding, more subtle, levels are still inherent in the physical language sounds that we can articulate and hear. The perfect medium via which the practitioner can go back to the pre-linguistic form of language – and the supreme state of being or cosmic consciousness – is physical sound (*nāda*). Every letter contains pure sound both in a transcendental form and as immanent substance:

12 See Bhāskararāya's auto-commentary *Prakāśa* on verse 26.

> And in this way [the pure sound] is [i.e. remains] woven [into the language sounds]. [We come to this conclusion] on the one hand owing to [the existence] of the subjective perception (*anubhava*) of a [phonetic] characteristic (*dharman*) *and* an [acoustic] characteristic [in the same language sound] – as if, in the [recited] syllable 'ka,' the letter K *and* [at the same time] the note C [were heard]. [And we come to this conclusion] on the other hand owing to the observation that the substance [remains always] woven into its product, like the clay in a clay pot … This means that *between* two letters pure sound exists in the same way as the bare thread between the pearls of a string of pearls. *Within* the letters, however, it appears not only like the clay in a clay pot, but also – since every language sound is in its turn pure sound as well – like the threads from which a fabric is woven, in this fabric itself. Here the simile of the string of pearls no longer holds, for the thread in the string of pearls itself is *not* a pearl.[13]

On the one hand, sound is the material of the language sounds, just as clay is the material of a clay pot. At the same time, sound is also what gives letters their structures and form, just as the thread makes the pearls into a chain. In contrast to the thread, however, which separates the pearls from one another but is not a pearl itself, the situation is different with sounds: the individual sound phenomena acquire their structures only in relation to the continuum of all sounds. The entire sound cosmos is both a sonic whole (*samaṣṭi*) and a collection of individual sounds (*vyaṣṭi*). Meditation on the 15-syllabled Śrīvidyā mantra consists of the embodied realization of this philosophical insight:

> The letters should be envisaged on top of one another in the body, threaded like pearls on a string. And one should imagine that the sound (*nāda*) that rises out of the Mūlādhāra is [immanent] in the letters like the thread [in a fabric].[14]

Bhāskararāya names several *mantra* exercises (1.37–52) for creating this experimental knowledge. The cycles in the body space (e.g. breaths, nerve impulses (*nāḍi*), and yogic *cakra*s) should be united with the recited *mantra* and its letters by means of resonation. The best exercise, however, is to experience all *mantra* letters thus incorporated and also the body itself as pure sound. The transformation of the whole body into a resonant *mantra* or 'sounding-board' is, according to Bhāskararāya, the gateway for transcending the ordinary human limits and finding the secret of cosmic consciousness:

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13 [… vaikharyākhyā mātṛkā jātā, vai niścayena spaṣṭataratvāt khaṃ karṇavivaravartinabhorūpaśrotendriyaṃ rāti gacchati,] tajjanyajñānaviṣayo bhavatīti vyutpatterityādyanyato vistaraḥ | evaṃ ca kakārādau katvādivarṇadharmāṇāṃ ṣaḍjādidhvanidharmāṇāṃ cānubhūyatvāt pariṇāme pariṇāmino 'nusyūtatāyā mṛdghaṭe darśanāc ca varṇeṣu nādo 'nusyūtaḥ | … ayaṃ bhāvaḥ – dvayor varṇayor madhyabhāge maṇidvayamadhyabhāgasthaśuddhasūtravacchuddhanādasya bhānam, varṇaśarīrāntarbhāge tu paṭābhedena saṃvalitatantuvadghaṭāntarmṛdvacca tattadvarṇābhedenaiva nādasya bhānam, na punas tatra maṇyantargatasūtradṛṣṭāntaḥ, tasya maṇito 'tyantabhinnatvād iti || (*Varivasyā Rahasya, Prakāśa* 1.21, p. 17).

14 mālāmaṇivad varṇāḥ krameṇa bhāvyā uparyupari || ādhārotthitanādo guṇa iva paribhāti varṇamadhyagataḥ | (*Varivasyā Rahasya*, 1.21b–22a).

> If the individual syllables of the Śrīvidyā from the lowest cakra (*akula*) to the thousand-petaled lotus (*unmanā*), and from the letter 'ka' to the most subtle *nāda* (*unmanā*), are all [present] for the whole duration of 1103.3 milliseconds[15] [and one] articulates [them only] as [pure] sound (*nāda*), in the end one will experience truth. And this is the hidden treasure of the manifestation of the (cosmic) consciousness.[16]

In an almost modern scientific way, Bhāskararāya unfolds his sonic mysticism and *mantra* practice as a sensory experience of infinity, eternity, and non-dual cosmic consciousness. His exposition makes clear that not only the forbidden substances of the Kaula, but also sonic contemplation can generate an embodied knowledge of the divine. This may be the reason why *mantra*s were at the core of Tantric traditions, whereas sexual rites were never practiced by all. The material and immaterial (infra- and suprasonic) aspects of sound make it a very complete and holistic symbol that can mediate non-dual worldviews and divine presences particularly well, because sound creates immediate participation and absorption.

Summary: eight theses for the study of Sanskrit Hinduism

It was neither my intention, nor was there enough space, to present all the contents of *Sound and Communication*. The objective was to elaborate on just a few of the major topics and theses found in the book, and to give an idea of the book's expanded text hermeneutics. Not only Bhāskararāya's sonic mysticism illustrates the necessity for such an expansion and a stronger emphasis on the sonic-aesthetic dimension. The following eight theses for the study of Sanskrit Hinduism summarize the reasons:

1. The fundamental thesis is that texts in Sanskrit Hinduism – whether they occur in everyday religious culture or in the traditions of scholars – are always texts to be heard, and this aspect should be incorporated into the hermeneutics itself – the hermeneutics of texts and the hermeneutics of culture.
2. As the focus in India remained on the spoken and sounding word, even after the introduction of writing, a purely philological approach relating only to semantics misses important information. In India one can only speak of texts at all in a sense that includes audible words. One could even say that the philologist's 'text' does not exist as a text type in the Indian tradition. Traditional works of literature fall neither quite into the category of literature nor into

15 In the original: 317 *truṭi*s (= 300ths of a second) and three and a half *nimeṣa*s (= 75ths of a second).

16 śrīvidyākūṭāvayaveṣu kakārādiṣūnmanānteṣu ‖ akulādikonmanāntapradeśasaṃstheṣu sakaleṣu | adhyuṣṭanimeṣottarasaptadaśādhikasatatrayatruṭibhiḥ ‖ uccarite nāde sati tasyānte tattvavedanaṃ bhavati | tadidaṃ caitanyābhivyaktinidānaṃ tu tattvaviṣuvākhyam ‖ (*Varivasyā Rahasya* 1.49–51)
See also the commentary *Prakāśa* (ed. Sastri, 33), which glosses the final achievement with 'tattvasya saṃvid abhedasya.'

that of music. The texts cannot be stripped of their sonic character and their embodiment in performance. Many discourses in the past attached great importance to a careful audible realization, and were often also very sensitive to the emotive contents, the communication of moods, and other non-semantic aspects of language.

3. This means there is need of an expanded method for text interpretation which includes the sensory aesthetic dimensions – such as sound patterns and rhythms of language, poetic diction, and the intonations, pitches, and colors of the voice. By including the self-communicating message of the medium text (like rhymes and so on) at the same time its (illocutionary and perlocutionary) performativity is included.
4. The aesthetic approach automatically implies an orientation towards actual practice, i.e. the ritual dimension and the performance contexts, as well as the poetic function or performative nature of texts.
5. Furthermore, in addition to ritual staging and literary text performances, there definitely must be an interest in content: the meanings that are ascribed to language, sound, and the voice, and their religious coding. There is a need to contextualize the role of language and sound in the cultural system of symbols and the multidimensional constitution of meaning.
6. A very important axiom of this approach is that language is effective both in its terminological, discursive, and logical aspect, and in its sensory, emotive aspect. The main function of language is the creation of sense and this takes place on a very great number of levels, both semantic and non-semantic. In fact, non-semantic sounds are also media of utmost importance to communication in India. In the religious field they are often considered particularly sacred. I recall the Veda as an oral canon, the Tantric *mantra*s, the role of music in devotional traditions, and cosmologies that view sound as the very basis of the universe. In Hindu India, there seems to be a much more participatory orientation towards world and language than Westerners are used to. Just as orality and literacy have not been broken apart, there was never really a split between mythos and logos.
7. As in the case of language, we have to expand our understanding of communication. Anyone speaking about communication – at least in today's Western cultural area – will not necessarily think of sound as an independent medium of expression and communication, and anyone studying texts is interested in the content and hardly aware that texts also always have a material quality – their sound – and can be perceived in a sensuous and emotional way. But this is precisely what is different in Hinduistic India, because the life-world is full of sounds and acoustic piety is a major way to relate to the divine.
8. The inclusion of the emic perspective is fundamental. Sound and music have not only been a very effective means of tuning into the deity and melding with the divine, but also a means to structure and organize abstract ideas in the traditional sciences and to train formalistic thinking.

So my first day in Vārāṇasī had a long-lasting effect, making me aware of a sonic culture that was productive of quite distinct social practices, symbolic forms, and aesthetic styles. In various ways sound and its subtle yet very physical quality has been a powerful medium of communication, chosen to invoke ordered relationships and structures, to bring about ritual effectiveness and generate sources of power and value, and not least to construct 'the sacred,' to embody assumptions about people's place in a larger order of things, and to produce emotional absorption.

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Banāras, the Concept of *tristha*ḷ*ī(-yātrā)* and the Inflow of the Marathas: An alternative view[1]

Irina Glushkova

Perhaps ethnic pride as well as scholarly insight led A.S. Altekar to assert that '[m]odern Benares is largely a creation of the Marathas'.[2] This Maharashtrian Brahman, who was the head of the BHU department of Ancient History and Culture in the 1930s, might have been referring mainly to the gorgeous view of the riverside ensemble of magnificent buildings erected by nobles from Maharashtra both before and even after the defeat of the Maratha Confederacy in 1818. Or he might have been looking beyond the visual evidences of glorious past preserved in the temple and structures of *brahmapurī*-lanes in order to include the more vulnerable Maharashtrian documents and memories, already decaying in a changing political and cultural environment.

Still, it is exactly this Maratha shading of this city that haunted me through my 'scholarly pilgrimages' to Banāras. Initially, in 1990s, at the time of my study of the Vārkarī cult, I explored a number of temples dedicated to Viṭhobā, a Maharashtrian Kṛṣṇa, reacting more to images of the god than to the context of his advent into Kashi or the history of shrines housing him. Later, in the next decade, I visited Banāras as a main link of the *tristha*ḷ*ī* chain, i.e. Kashi, Prayag (Allahabad) and Gaya, identified by Maharashtrian pandits and pilgrims who understood *tristha*ḷ*ī-yātrā* as *tīrtha-yātrā* par excellence. Finally, after digging up the detailed twists of mythological and historical past, I found Banāras to have been an area of contestation among Maharashtrian princes, generals, bankers, and noble widows for the gains of their own and not only, as most history shows, between Hindus and Muslims, or northerners (Hindu or Muslim) and southerners (Marathas), or any of these and the British.

Altogether the inflow into Kashi of 'dakshini' (*dakhnī*) pandit families has been dated no later than the early sixteenth century, and its consequences have come into

1 I am thankful to Dr Lee Schlesinger for his helpful comments and critiques. I transliterate the gloss *tristha*ḷ*ī* following its Marathi spelling throughout the paper unless I refer to its Sanskrit usage.

2 Altekar 1937: 62. This statement uses 'Maratha' as equivalent to 'Maharashtrian' as had been common in earlier usage. The first gloss eventually came to designate a (member of a) warrior caste and is mostly used nowadays in this particular sense. In this paper, however, I follow the appropriate historical usage, which freely interchanges 'Maratha' and 'Maharashtrian'.

focus in J. Benson's contribution to the 'Pandit' project, S. Pollock, R. O'Hanlon, and C. Minkowski's publications, and A. Vajpeyi's Ph.D. thesis. Moreover, everyone from the British colonial authorities like Warren Hastings, Jonathan Duncan, James Prinsep, and Bishop Reginald Heber to scholars such as Moti Chandra, C.A. Bayly, and V. Dalmia has emphasized the density of Marathas throughout eighteenth and early nineteenth century Banāras. In contrast to most of these authors, I deal with Banāras's past mainly through Marathi-language sources (correspondence, diaries, financial reports, family histories, and court eulogies) and with its bygone Maratha shading through the present activities of the Akhil Bhāratīy Mahārāṣṭra Tīrthapurohit Saṅgh based in the part of Banāras still known as 'Kashi Maharashtra'. This approach to the history and contemporary life of the city produces my 'alternative view,' which helps complement and connect the dominant scholarly accounts of Banāras.

A resident of Banāras and a *jagadguru*, Narayana Bhatta composed his *Tristhalīsetu* ('Bridge to the Three Holy Cities') (Salomon 1985) in the sixteenth century. The text consists of four sections (Sāmāṇya, or General, Prayāga, Kāśī, and Gayā) and describes the goals and merits of pilgrimage and the rituals to be performed in each of the *tīrtha*s. Excluding the introduction, two-thirds of the rest is devoted to Banāras and its sub-*tīrtha*s, far outweighing the remaining treatment of Prayag and Gaya. It is in the meaning of 'bridging' the three cities that I started reading through the word *setu* in the title of Narayana's work before shifting to its understanding as a 'bridge' between North Indian sacred places and Maharashtra.

Until the late nineteenth century, the *Tristhalīsetu* went on circulating in Sanskrit manuscripts and concise versions in Marathi. Its impact was still acknowledged three centuries after its composition: Haraprasad Shastri, a Banārasī *mahāmahopadhyāya*, summed up the contribution of Narayana Bhatta in the following way: 'The great Pandit, who infused southern ideals at Benares in all matters relating to Hindu life and Hindu religion in preference to northern ideals current in Kanauj, Kasi, Mithila and Bengal, was Narayan Bhatta, an intellectual giant who not only wrote a vast number of Sanskrit works but organized the colony of Southern Brahmans at Benares, traveled far and wide and founded a family of Pandits who hold their pre-eminence even up to the present moment' (Shastri 1912: 7). The book was accepted as the most authoritative source on the subject of pilgrimage, and eventually, almost three centuries after its composition, was printed nowhere else but in Poona (Pune), the former capital of the Maratha Confederacy, in 1915 (Kane 1953: 582).

Narayana's father, the renowned Sanskrit scholar Rameshvara Bhatta, migrated to Banāras along with other Maharashtrian Brahmans in the 1520s (Benson 2001; Vajpeyi 2004). By 1924 a genealogy of his clan contained 88 names of Sanskrit experts who had established their authority over every field of traditional knowledge (Benson 2001: 107) and whose intellectual authority reached its climax during the seventeenth century (Pollock 2003). Though the *Tristhalīsetu* by no means was the first treatise on *tīrtha-yātrā*, it became so popular that many great scholars, including descendants of Narayana Bhatta, continued to compile summaries of it. Most of

them reproduced the notion of *tristhalī* in titles of their compositions (Kane 1953: 552–84), thus reiterating the 'connectedness' of places presumably also connected by a network of Maharashtrian pandits and/or priests, just as they are connected even today by the families of the Devs of Banāras, the Pitres of Allahabad, the Marathes of Gaya, and others from pan-Indian *tīrthas*. After discussions with non-Maratha pandits and scholars of contemporary Banāras and email queries among Sanskritologists outside India, I conclude that it was Narayana Bhatta who coined and successfully promoted the *tristhalī* concept. By combining *tristhalī* with *yātrā*, this term that urges visiting Kashi, Prayag, and Gaya within one pilgrimage came into usage. Moreover, Narayana Bhatta is unanimously credited with exerting his influence for rebuilding during the 1580s the temple of Viśveśvara, which was, after a later demolition, rebuilt by Ahilyabai Holkar of Maheshvar/Indore, another Maharashtrian, in the 1780s.

Scions of the Bhatta family along with other Maharashtrian Brahmans and their messengers circulated between Banāras and Maharashtra providing their local agents with manuscripts for dissemination of the idea of *tristhalī* as a model *tīrtha-yātrā*. Logically, writings in Sanskrit were meant primarily for those in command of Sanskrit, i.e. mostly for Brahmans. The latter would have paid a visit to Banāras and, after achieving a higher level of distinction or getting a decision on other matters, would have left for their 'green pastures' at home. At the same time details about Kashi appeared in the Marathi language, too. Thus, the first *Kāśī-māhātmya* seems to have appeared in the *Gurucaritra*, a sacred book of the Brahmanic Datta tradition of Maharashtra as early as 1578 (Kamat 1950)[3]. The *māhātmya* text directs everyone to Banāras and abounds in imperatives, 'Go! Take ablutions! Perform this and that! Get concentrated! Worship Keshavaditya! Worship Adikeshava! Worship Brahmanas! Do not block the way in the tirthas!' etc.

It could not have been a mere accident that Gaga Bhatta, a great-grandson of Narayana Bhatta, was motivated to compile a pedigree of the great Maratha warrior Shivaji Bhosle and to preside at his coronation in 1674. It could not have been a coincidence that Kavindra Paramananda, a Maharashtrian Brahman and a friend of Gaga Bhatta, composed a Sanskrit epic poem, actually a *mahākāvya*, to record the history of Shivaji's rise to power. It is particularly important that the poet describes how he had stayed in Banāras when Shivaji commissioned him to compose a poetical biography of the Bhosle clan: 'Once upon a time / Came the best of brahmins / The poet Paramananda, / On pilgrimage to Benares [...]// The pundits of Kashi rejoiced / To see Paramananda [...].'[4] Now, has Shivaji ever visited Banāras?

In 1666 Aurangzeb kept Shivaji captive a couple of months in Agra (or in Delhi, as per some sources). Though not much is known about his escape and means of transportation back to Maharashtra, a Maratha chronicler (Krishnaji Anant Sabhasad, in the *Śrīśivaprabhuce*) of the end of the seventeenth century narrated the

3 I am thankful for this insight to Prof. Rana P.B. Singh.

4 Cited from Laine 2001: 43.

story of Shivaji's flight via Mathura to Banāras and his stop there for ablutions and other rituals. One hundred years later another chronicler (Malharrao Chitnis, in the *Śakakarte śrīśiva chatrapatī mahārāj*) introduced more details of Shivaji's arrival at Allahabad, his ablutions and temple worship in Banāras and a passage to Jagannath-Puri. A little bit later a third author (Chitnis Khando Ballal, in the *Śivdigvijay*) asserted that Shivaji and his guide made for Banāras and went through the usual routine of worship followed by all pilgrims. From there they went to Allahabad and Gaya and thence to Bengal. By the middle of the twentieth century, popular accounts described Shivaji both as a prison-breaker and a pious pilgrim who performed every prescribed ritual in the three holy cities of *tristha*ḷ*ī-yātrā* after his escape from captivity. But perhaps the first attempt to place Shivaji physically in Banāras comes in the above-mentioned *mahākāvya* by Kavindra, writing in Shivaji's court in Maharashtra in the 1670s. Even though the text is not finished, thus leaving the itinerary on the way home unspecified, the initial reference to Banāras not only converts Shivaji from a 'belligerent hero' to a 'religious' one but also opens the way for non-Brahman Maharashtrians to the famous sacred place of the Doab.

The founder of the Maratha state died in 1680, six years after his coronation, and this is the precise date that C. A. Bayly names for the beginning of Marathas' noticeable entry into Banāras as major donors by substituting for Rajputs. He sums up: 'By the mid-nineteenth century, the majority of temples in Benares were foundations of "natives of the Deccan" within the previous 150 years' (Bayly 2010: II, 137). Even today I can corroborate this statement by finding plaques in various temples, although many have been obliterated and a search for them requires having a good guide of advanced age from the Maharashtrian community of the city. My 'scholarly pilgrimages' found servants, professionally attached to some shrines, and nearby residents who turn out to be of Maharashtrian descent, and these reveal stories hidden behind layers of paint; some temples are still associated with descendants of former princely families (the Scindias, Bhosles, Holkars, Gaekwads or with some clans less known outside Maharashtra, such as the Vincurkars, Pantsachivs, Patwardhans, Pratinidhis, etc.). Some buildings have been recently renovated and are decorated with pictures of Shivaji and Ramdas, a militant saint-poet. The grand palace built by famous Nana Phadnavis, 'peshwa's peshwa', which nowadays houses the 'Kashi Maharashtra Bhavan', though partly dilapidated still impresses by its grandeur from both inside and outside while its storage rooms contain furniture pieces, mirror frames etc. dated from the bygone epoch.

Inner view of the palace of the 18th-century Maratha statesman Nana Phadnavis

But the real treasury of invaluable information with exact sums of expenses remains hidden in Marathi language narratives. They provide the names of donors, building costs for temples and palaces, funding channels for local festivals, etc. in the *tristha!ī* cities, particularly in Banāras. *Kulvṛtānt*, *caritras*, and *tīrtha-yātrā prabandhs* of Maharashtrian princes, generals, and bankers, as well as account books of the latter jealously compete in enumerating what had been built and by whom, including one's own ancestors, and the cost. As I observed in my paper on pecuniary matters in the pilgrimage of Raghunathrao Vincurkar (born 1824), a prince of Vincur, Maharashtrians on *tīrtha-yātrā* were apparently 'obsessed with money – especially if it belonged to somebody else' (Glushkova 2006: 230). The prince set out on his long pilgrimage after a loss of his wife Kashibai – both 'Kashi' and 'Varanasi' were extremely popular names among Maharashtrian Brahman women in the eighteenth century; so were 'Kashinath' and 'Vishvanath' among men.

All studies by Bayly contain numerous references to the presence of Marathas in Banāras, although the reason for his choice of 1680 to date its beginning is not specified. It may signify 'a discovery' of Banāras by 'lay' Brahmans, who were not immediately engaged in the ritual sphere and did not need training in a particular field or approval from the highest intellectual council of 'the Athenes of the East', as Francois Bernier called Banāras. Shankarji Malhar exemplifies such other Brahmans, having fled to Banāras during hard times in the 1690s. He had been himself a Brahman diplomat and a member of the 'eight ministers counsel' at the service

of Rajaram, a younger son of Shivaji, and after moving north he reemerged as an envoy of the Mughal Emperor to negotiate claims of Marathas for fiscal rights to a few Mughal provinces (Sardesai 1948: 38), thus proving the mundane concerns of his flight to Banāras. Shankarji was in charge of secretarial affairs, and hence had a title of *saciv*, later prefixed by *pant* (from *paṇḍit*). One of his descendants built a Śaṅkar temple in Banāras, as I learned from a family account (Bhagwat 1905), which I traced at the time of my 'scholarly pilgrimages' to objects of Maharashtrian background. The temple is still owned by the Pantsachiv family nowadays residing in Mumbai and is perfectly maintained by a local manager.

The Marathas' success in securing levies from six provinces established vectors for their expansionist politics and resulted in the subjugation of territory beyond their Deccan nucleus. In the eighteenth century a chain of Maratha principalities emerged on the line from Poona to Delhi (and also from Poona southwards), and thus a geopolitical corridor for the movement of Maharashtrians was formed. This power over space extending through Dhar, Dewas, Maheshvar/Indore, Sagar, Jhansi, Ujjain/Gwalior and other Maratha states meant that Maharashtrians could travel safer than any other ethnic community. Where to? Primarily to Banāras because it was the place where the 'new intellectuals' (Pollock 2003) of their own kin constantly pressed them to come. It is in this context that we may look at the oldest specimen of the Marathi chronicles, the *Mahikāvatīcī urf māhīmcī bakhar*, dating from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century, which is credited with the first occurrence of the unique ethno-toponymic construct known as 'Maharashtra dharma' (Rajvade 1923). It speaks of Kashi as a northern border of the spread of the Maharashtra dharma pointing to Rameshvaram in the south, Dwarka in the west and Tuljapur in the east. This spatial outline might have encircled the territory where the rulings of Maharashtrian Brahmans in Banāras were effective in settling certain disputes. O'Hanlon's research on judgments about particular rights of various Brahmanic families in littoral Konkan strongly suggests such an interpretation (O'Hanlon and Minkowski 2008; O'Hanlon 2009a, 2009b). These 'letters home' were written in Marathi in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Maharashtrian pandits of Banāras who held their discussions in the Mukti pavilion of the Viśveśvar temple, with which the name of Narayana Bhatta had been closely associated. References to the venue at the beginning of documents were meant to confer authority on them.

It is here that I need to specify that the first families of Maharashtrian Brahmans who settled in Banāras, including that of Rameshvara Bhatta, had come from Paithan, i.e. the ancient town of Pratishthana on the Godavari river. It used to be a widely acknowledged seat of leading *dhārma-śāstrīs*, who were sought to resolve all sorts of disputes related to communal life and livelihood. Without speculating about the decline of Paithan and mass exodus of its Brahmans, I will quote from Ananya Vajpeyi on the movement of Maharashtrians into early sixteenth century Banāras: '[O]nce they arrived there in successive ways of migration and settlement, these brahmanas made Kāśī what it was to become in the memory of modern Indians. [...] Maharashtrian settlers recreated in Kāśī the Paiṭhan of their historical memory – and

in the process created for the first time the distinctive ecumene of Varanasi' (Vajpeyi 2004: 35–8).

During the reign of Shivaji's grandson (1707–1749), his first ministers/peshwas went on trying to bring under Maratha control the most important *tīrthas* of the Doab, particularly Banāras. They needed it for various ends, including their own legitimacy as Brahmans and de facto rulers. Returning in 1719 from Delhi to Maharashtra, the first peshwa stopped for ablutions in Banāras. Shortly afterwards his religious yearning was backed by diverse real-estate activities and establishment of *huṇḍī* (travel-check) offices by agents of Maharashtrian 'lay' Brahmans and Brahman-warriors. 'In 1735 repairs to the ghats on the Ganga in Banaras were undertaken on the Peswa's orders' (Gokhale 1988: 182). At least one quarter of 80 of these bathing wharves functioning nowadays, including the most remarkable and ritually significant, were constructed or repaired by individuals from Maharashtra, ranging from peshwas to princes, their ministers and royal widows. Among them are Dashashvamedha, Panchaganga, Trilochan-, Brahma, Durgaghat etc., along with those which still bear the names of Maharashtrians or of places under their control, such as Balaji, Scindia, Gwalior, Bhosle, Munshi (a Nagpurian minister), Ahilyabai. There are umbrellas made of bamboo stems and foliage meant to protect from sun and rain local (*gaṅgāputra*) Brahmans waiting for clients at the Ganga bank which are said (by a Bengali author! (Bhattacharya 1999: 251–2) to have been introduced in the eighteenth century by a Maharashtrian Brahman, Narayan Dikshit, a preceptor and caretaker of the peshwa's family and a skillful real-estate agent. These picturesque shelters together with the outline of the riverside eventually started to be used as a symbol of the city and found their way into every guidebook and tourist advertisement. There is still *Dīkṣit kī galī* in 'Kashi Maharashtra' along with numerous temples in nearby lanes, from Bindu Mādhav to Kāla Bhairav, an official guardian of the city, built, rebuilt or established through Maharashtrian patronage.

Statues of dancers and pictures of Shivaji and Ramdas in the inner hall of a Maratha residence

In 1735 Banāras witnessed the grand pilgrimage-cum-diplomatic mission of Radhabai, a widow of the first peshwa and a mother of the ruling peshwa, and this event led to confrontation between North Indian and Maharashtrian Brahmans in the city (Glushkova forthc. a). In 1736, the peshwa demanded *tristhaḷī*-cities plus Mathura as revenue lands from the emperor. Since then the demands for *tristhaḷī*-cities were repeated many times and obsessively articulated as the last will of almost every peshwa. The 'alternative view' I adopt in this paper suggests that Awadh's nomination in 1739 of Balwant Singh as the Hindu raja of Banāras could have been an attempt to outweigh the Marathas' growing influence in the city and the Doab region. Banāras, Prayag, and Gaya were crowded with physical bodies of Maharashtrians bridging the cities, and the 1740s saw the Marathas' readiness to capture Banāras by force, while various sources mention the nawab of Awadh's threat to kill the peshwa Balaji Bajirao. Shocked by the possibility of brahmanicide Maharashtrian pandits of Banāras pleaded with the peshwa for restraint in this matter. In 1743 the peshwa and his 75,000 troops army performed a full-scale *tristhaḷī-yātrā* and, on completing all rituals, advanced to Bengal. In fact, the surrender of these *tīrthas* would have

meant a disastrous blow to Muslim prestige, and no wonder that eventually, one by one, Gaya, Allahabad and Banāras were secured by the East Indian Company, then underestimated by other rival parties.

By the 1750s, it was still the Marathas who held various towns and roads, guaranteeing their compatriots' safe transit to the cities of the Doab. Calls from Banāras sounded more insistent, and *tristha!ī-yātrā* became not only a reality but a fashionable and useful practice. Unlike 'service people' who kept going to Banāras 'on business,' the Brahman élite of the eighteenth century went on pilgrimage to Banāras linked with visits to Allahabad and Gaya as a high principle that also enhanced family prestige. This pilgrimage and travel practice spread through Maharashtrian Brahman culture among other social groups. First, other widows of the peshwas' family like Kashibai, Sagunabai, Esubai etc., visited the *tristha!ī*-cities and made people and powers talk about Marathas. Kashibai, the widow of Bajirao I, and the mother of then incumbent Balaji Bajirao, even managed to quarrel with Balwant Singh, in whose palace she was invited to stay during her pilgrimage in 1746. Later, influential widows from other – including non-Brahman – princely families, adopted the example of Brahman widows of ruling families. On the whole, they appeared not only as pilgrims but as social and political leaders of pilgrim caravans known as *yātrā*. The number of pilgrims forming those caravans could reach up to 40,000. Besides kin and servants, crowds of people from various social groups (*āthrāpagad jāt*) were drawn both by religious motives and by perspectives of safe travel under the protection of armed guards. These extraordinary women carried peshwas' letters to the Emperor of Delhi and to the Nawab of Awadh, strengthened ties between the states of the Maratha Confederacy en route and even held diplomatic talks with new officials, including Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of India[5], and other functionaries of the East Indian Company. I would say that in contrast to widows from Bengal who came to Banāras to die, widows from Maharashtra were enthusiastically engaged in actual politics. Altogether, side by side with military campaigns, processions of pilgrims created a polity-on-the-march with every feature of officialdom and mundane life such as childbirth and thread ceremonies etc., except weddings. It was Banāras that exercised 'its pull over long distances from a static center,' which happened to be a 'political center' at the same time, as per Jacob Heesterman's treatment of the sacred as dynamic by definition (Heesterman 1992).

5 In 1781, at the time of Chait Singh rebellion in Banāras, Hastings' life was saved by the two Brahman ambassadors of the Maratha princely state of Nagpur, 'out of affectionate attachment', as per the notes of a British traveler [Hodges 1793: 52].

Ahilyābāī Ghāṭ, named after a Maratha ruler of the Holkar dynasty, famous all over India for her charity

While the dominance of Maharashtrian Brahmans in Banāras from the sixteenth century and the Maratha political impact in the eighteenth century together contributed to Banāras' prosperity, physical form, and 'more southern' patterns of religiosity, Banāras itself became newly implanted into earlier Marathi narratives rooted in the Maharashtrian homeland. That is, the pull of Banāras made itself felt in revising the stories of Maharashtrian heroes and saint-poets. Not only was Shivaji reported on a *tristhaḷī-yātrā* , but stories of the saint-poets also came to include similar travels. Despite singing of their deep affection for the god Viṭhobā and the *vārī* (pilgrimage to Pandharpur) and despite claiming the futility of visiting other sacred places, many of the saint-poets found themselves propelled to faraway Kashi by interpolations into their hymns and accounts of later hagiographers. Mahipati, a Brahman from near Paithan who wrote in the second part of the eighteenth century, managed to send Dnyaneshvar, Namdev, and Eknath on prolonged journeys to the sacred places of the Doab, thus confirming the absolute importance of *triṣṭhaḷī-yātrā* as a core value characteristic of pre-colonial Maharashtrian society. Such additions became widely

accepted and were even substantiated by various 'material finds,' like Dnyaneshvar's inscription on a stone pillar from Banāras etc. Neglecting allusions to the Pandavas' circumambulation which the *Mahābhārata* fixed as an ideal *tīrtha-yātrā* though never tested by practice, Maharashtrians of the early twentieth century deciding to go on *kāśī-yātrā* felt inspired by the examples of bhakti poets who in earlier versions of their hymns paid no attention to Banāras (Glushkova 2007, 2009).

During the prime of the Maratha Confederacy, three out of four *dhāms*, i.e. Rameshvaram, Jagannath-Puri and Dvarka had fallen under the Maratha influence exercised by the Bhosles of Thanjavur and Nagpur and the Gaekwads of Baroda. The fourth *dhām*, i.e. Badrinath, stayed out of reach of any Maratha principality, and it might have been the reason why Kashi came to replace it. A biographer of one of Maratha princely clans explained: 'There is Kashi to the north, Rameshvaram to the south, Dvarka on the west, and Jagannath to the east. [...] The old belief used to be that whoever makes a yatra to all of them, will gain plenty of merits' (Bhagwat 1905: 137). Here the attraction of Banāras appears within the Maharashtrian outlook in a set of sacred places different from the *tristha!ī*. A Maharashtrian tourist-cum-pilgrim who in 1970s went on a pre-paid tour in an AC compartment named his travelogue *Kāśī rāmeśvar gītā kṛṣṇeśvar*, showing he did not forget the bygone fame of Marathas through their presence in Banāras (Ranade 1998). The first tourist-offices established in Maharashtra also offered guided tours reflecting Maharashtrian interests, and one of its earliest booklets was *Tristha!ī yātrā-varṇan arthāt prayāg-kāśī-gayā yātrā* (Kulkarni 1964). This route is frequently duplicated nowadays too, forming a core part of larger itineraries.

In tune with O'Hanlon, I approach Banāras from outside and predominantly through Marathi sources. It was not far from Rameshvaram, which was named the southern limit of the 'Maharashtra dharma', in the former Maratha princely state of Thanjavur (now in Tamilnadu) that I came across the *Tristha!ī yātrecyā lāvaṇyā* (Mahadick 1951) and discovered the amplitude of Maharashtrian attachment towards the idea of *tristha!ī* and Banāras. This poem eulogized the Maratha ruler of Thanjavur, Serfoji II, who had gone on pilgrimage in 1821. The first line of the first *lāvaṇī* (stanza) warns an audience that 'I will tell a story of a tristali-yatra of Sharabhendra, oh, gentlemen, be considerate to it'. At the end of the same *lāvaṇī* the raja himself announces that he 'is in a hurry to go on kashi-yatra'. Altogether throughout its 64 chapters, the poem enumerates various places, but it devotes 35 stanzas, i.e. more than a half, to Banāras, its temples and rituals. These 35 stanzas are preceded with two *lāvaṇī*s on Prayag and are followed with two *lāvaṇī*s on Gaya, which is the same sequence of places that appears in a *śāstrik* ruling, even though the raja actually approached the city in the reversed order, traveling via Calcutta.

This example again confirms that Banāras stood as the main component of *tristha!ī*, where this idea has been easily equated with *kāśī-yātrā*, which, in its turn, is elevated to the status of *mahāyātrā*. Rules were spread to regulate the routine of the 'great pilgrimage': a Maharashtrian pilgrim was instructed to enter Kashi twice or even thrice before and after respective visits to Prayag and Gaya and also

to extend the term of stay during a rainy *caturmās*. These prescriptions of texts and of Maharashtrian pandits of Banāras actually shaped the route leading from Maharashtra to Kashi. Short manuscripts (*pothīs*) in Marathi circulated under the name of *Tristha*ḷ*ī-māhātmya* till the beginning of the twentieth century explaining in simple terms the sequence of events and distribution of rituals among three places. After the fall of the Maratha Confederacy in 1818, Bajirao II, the last peshwa (whose senior wife's name was Varanasibai), went to exile to nearby Bithur and kept on donating for constructions in Banāras. Although Banāras has been provisionally mentioned in the terms of surrender, Mountstuart Elphinstone decided that this was non-acceptable because Banāras was 'the grand resort of all Marrattha pilgrims'. Elphinstone, who had started his carrier in Banāras in 1795 as an Assistant to the Resident and happened to be the last British Resident at the Poona court, the seat of Maratha power, also urged settling Bajirao II 'either on the East of the Ganges or as far North as may be convenient to diminish the chance of a concourse of Marrattha Pilgrims' (Ballhatchet 1957: 44–5)[6].

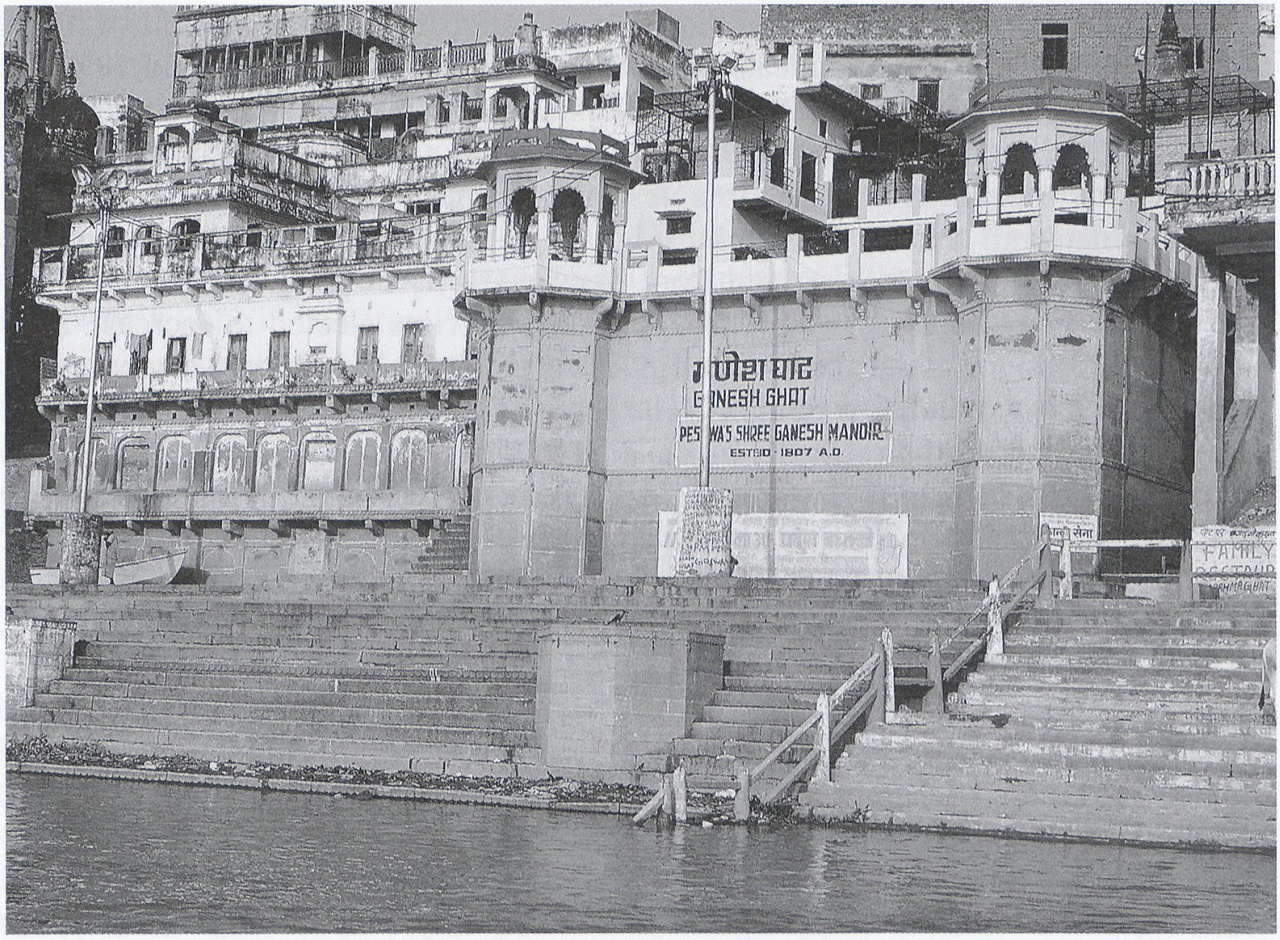
Although the priority of Banāras as a politically contested place started to diminish by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the idea of *tristha*ḷ*ī* had already taken its roots in the Marathas' consciousness. The biographer of another Maratha prince in the mid-nineteenth century explains that 'anyone who moves towards Gaya [for memorial rituals] cannot skip Kashi and Prayag which are situated very near by. They are great kshetras, and it would be a wrong [decision] having come so far to go back without visiting them. That is why at the moment of departure from one's home, one should realize that turning to [these places] is unavoidable' (Tryambakkar 1964: 208).

The Maharashtrian Brahman Altekar was by no means the first to have noticed that contemporary Banāras was mainly constructed by the Marathas. He was following Duncan, Heber, Prinsep, and the Bengali Bholanath Chunder among others who recognized the Marathas' involvement in the making of the city and its atmosphere. Duncan, a British resident in Banāras (1787–1795), had to routinely deal 'with the violent and arrogant proceedings of the Indian princes, especially the Marathas and their followers, either residing at or visiting Benares. His political proceedings contain many references to the activities of the Marathas, particularly of Scindia and the Nagpur family, and the enormities they committed in Benares' (Narain 159: 163). The resident reported to his seniors, 'It seems too evident that the Marhattas conceive themselves either entitled or permitted to set up in Benares an Imperium in Imperio under which it becomes very difficult to carry on any administrative whatsoever' (ibid.: 164). Enmity with Maharashtrian Brahmans even inspired Bharatendu Harishchandra to satirize them 'for their greed, [...] the conspiracies required to net maximum patronage' etc. in the Marathi language part of his play *Premjoginī* (Dalmia 2011: 96n).

6 Notwithstanding Elphinstone's 'strong objections to addition to the number of the Princes at that city' the Governor-General in Council after all decided to allow Chimnaji, the last peshwa's brother, to reside at Banāras [Ballhatchet 1957: 49].

Moti Chandra touches upon the theme of Marathas in his *Kāśī kā itihās* (2003), and each of Bayly's studies repeats this theme, e.g.: '[B]etween 1760 and 1830 the Mahrattas poured wealth into Benares, Allahabad and Hardwar, constructing large numbers of religious buildings and feeding a whole new generation of priests in these centers' (Bayly 1973: 44). He notes that the majority of temples existent by the mid-nineteenth century in popular pilgrimage-places had been built during the preceding 150 years by folk arrived from Deccan (Bayly 2010: II, 136–7), and that 'in the year 1786, as many as 170,000 Maratha pilgrims elected to increase their merit by traveling to Allahabad in an opulent armed convoy' (ibid.: 127), naturally with double or triple entry to Banāras. The British General Governor reported about thirty thousand Maratha residents in Benares in 1817 (ibid.: 137), and the city was regularly visited by armed 'Mahratta' pilgrimages of up to 2,00,000 men; by 1820 'Mahratta' chiefs and nobles constituted eight per cent of the population (ibid.: 144). Prinsep, an Assay Master at the time of the first census of Banāras (1828–1829) discovered 11,311 Maharashtrian Brahmans from 11 subcastes (Prinsep 1996: 13), and this number amounted to one third of the Brahmanic population of the holy city as per Dalmia's calculation (Dalmia 2001: 94). In the nineteenth century, as Dalmia shows, and in the early twentieth century, as is evident from the foundation stages of the Benares Hindu University with its Maharaja Sayajirao Library and Shivaji Gyms, Maharastrians still felt their special bonds with the city to which they had contributed so much in spirit and wealth. Altogether the Marathas' attraction to Banāras and some other *tīrthas* of all-Indian significance ended only after the 1857 Mutiny, but their involvement with these places was unerringly recognised till 1947 after which a new era of regional self-identification began.

More historical evidence is available in printed documents and unpublished papers from archives of ex-princely clans in Central India, Maharashtra and South India. There are still remnants of that ideally organized network of cooperation and rivalry of Maharashtrian *upādhye*s of the *tristhaḷī*-cities who wait for pilgrims from Maharashtra. It is to the family of the Devs and their contacts from the Akhil Bhāratīy Mahārāṣṭra Tīrthapurohit Saṅgh that I owe many thanks for their hospitality and insights during my fieldwork in Banāras, Allahabad and Gaya. My informants from the Brahman community of 'Kashi Maharashtra' half-jokingly told me a legend that their forefathers had been invited for ancestors' rituals to Gaya in times immemorial and had been so generously paid that they could not proceed any further south than Banāras. It was in the narrow lanes of 'Kashi Maharashtra' that I joined in gripping celebrations of *Gaṇeś-caturthī* organized by the Maharashtrian community of Banāras. Because of the peshwas' particular attachment to Gaṇeś, this festival had become a popular household celebration among Maratha nobility, a temple event in Maharashtra and in the famous '56 Gaṇeś temples' now mentioned in every book on Banāras.



Gaṇeś Ghāṭ

One can guess or rather dig into temple archives and find under layers of paint the names of the donors, most of whom would prove to be Maharashtrians[7]. Niels Gutschow traces this kind of 'Marathas' involvement on the example of the Pañcakrośī Mandir, for the origins of which neither dates nor donors are known. Still the temple priest 'identifies the movable figure of the riding warrior in the lower southern niche of the entrance space as the one who '400 years ago' came from Maharashtra to establish the temple' (Gutschow 2006: 120). The equestrian figure with a miniature wife behind him is strikingly similar to images of the god Khaṇḍoba from Jejuri (south of Pune) of whom the Holkars were the greatest admirers. The history of the *pañcakrośīyātrā*, which is not evident in earlier literature on Kashi, abounds with references to Maharashtrian names in more recent time. For example, Bhagvantrao Pingle planted trees along the route in the nineteenth century to provide pilgrims with shade (Tryambakkar 1964: 76), and Vishvanath Shastri Datar almost 100 years later suggested transportation for pilgrims' luggage in order to make the circulation more attractive and thereby to raise income for temples situated on the route (Vidyarthi et al. 1979: 90).

7 As the number of '56' comes from *paurāṇik* sources, those Gaṇapatis were (re)established as their material evidences. References are scattered in Marathi language sources referring to names of donors, amount of donations etc.

A complication of proposing my 'alternative view' of Banāras is that to substantiate it I must dwell on the history of Maharashtra. Scholars of Banāras proper should definitely be aware of the name of Lakshmidhara Bhatta, *rājguru* and influential minister of the Gahadavalas of Kashi, when it was a political center of the twelfth century Kannauj. Lakshmidhara had authored the *Kṛtyakalpataru*, a digest interpreting various aspects of dharma. One of its sections, the *Tīrthavivecanakāṇḍa,* had dealt with *tīrthas* and had been lost until its miraculous discovery in the 1940s in the private library of the Nagpurian Bhosles, once the most powerful and influential Maratha princes. It is worth mentioning that it was published nowhere else but in the Gaekwad Oriental series, in Maratha-ruled Baroda. Since then, the *Tīrthavivecanakāṇḍa* has been accepted as the first treatise on the subject of *tīrtha-yātrā.* It looks as if it had found its way into Maharashtra in the thirteenth century and was put to use by Hemadripant, a prime-minister to the Yadava kings of Devagiri, located at a short distance from famous Paithan. Unlike other parts of the Hemadri's compendium, the *tīrtha* section is not available, but it is tempting to frame a hypothesis that, similar to other sections, this one, too, might have heavily adopted from the work of its predecessor, and thus spread the information on Banāras and a transit from there to Prayag and Gaya, which had been the main subject of Lakshmidhara's *Kṛtyakalpataru.* As was painstakingly established by Richard Salomon, many passages of Narayana Bhatta's *Tristhalīsetu* were word by word copied from earlier authors, including Lakshmidhara, but unlike them he did not just repeat the three names but connected them within a single notion of the *tristhalī* and the network of Maharashtrian Brahmans from the three cities.

I am not aware of other examples in the history of South Asia of the *tristhalī/ tristhaḷī* concept being so literally exploited and elevated to an axiological matter within the mindscape of Marathas and their politics. In his work Narayana Bhatta also encouraged pandits to interpret questions unspecified in sacred texts on their own and recommended actual examples as setting up precedents, 'Other religious duties of pilgrimage also are to be observed, as they are learned from the practice of refined people' (Salomon 1985: 261). It was the Maharashtrian nobility, from peshwas to their generals to royal widows, who acted as 'refined people' and led caravans of pilgrims-cum-warriors through Maratha-controlled areas towards the *tristhaḷī*-cities.

As per my queries among North Indian pandits in Banāras in late 2000s, *tristhaḷī-yātrā* has not been an incentive to Hindus of North India, notwithstanding the separate pull of each of the three cities for various ends. Moreover, the 'city of light', as per its cliché image in North India, has not even been the first choice for many North and West Indian regions, as is apparent from various studies, e.g. of Gujarati pilgrimage practice by David E. Sopher (Sopher 1987) or of Himachal Pradesh and parts of (former) Uttar Pradesh's preferences by Surinder M. Bhardwaj as reflected in his tables of ranking of Hindu sacred places (Bhardwaj 1983: 101, 103, 106–10, 113).[8]

8 Recent news on free pilgrimage for senior citizens (aged 65 and above) in Madhya Pradesh published in *The Indian Express* (12.04.2012) enumerated 14 sacred places included in an approved list with Kashi placed on the seventh position between Vaiṣṇodevī and Tirūpati.

Similarly *tristha!ī-yātrā* is not known to be popular to the south of Maharashtra either as a term or a practice. While recording his field experience of the late 1940s M.N. Shrinivas directly referred to Banāras in a retrospective assumption: 'I am fairly certain that over 50 years ago, only a few Rampurians, most of them Brahmins, had heard of the famous pilgrim centres at Tirupati, Madura, Rameshwaram and Banaras, and even among them probably not more than one or two had visited them. In those days, a pilgrimage to Banāras was regarded as a hazardous enterprise though much less so than in the nineteenth century when a pilgrim's successful return from it was a fortuitous accident'[9] (Shrinivas 1980: 320–1). V.N. Rao and S. Subrahmanyam expressed their dismay[10] by having found almost no long-distance pilgrimage-literature in Tamil or Telugu for the period prior to the beginning of the nineteenth century, though they referred to 'ideal' Brahman students who 'must have undertaken [this travel] in medieval period, even if none of them have left us accounts.' (Rao and Subrahmanyam 2006: 354).

Contrary to the so-called 'Rampurians' from Karnataka and 'ideal' students from the South, Maharashtrians, and Maratha Brahmans in the first instance, were well indoctrinated for visits to Banāras in the form of *kāśī-yātrā*, i.e. *tristha!ī-yātrā*.[11] This concept also found its way into colloquial Marathi in a variant pronunciation as *tirstha!ī* where it also means 'vexatious or vain journeying from place to place; running hither and thither on fruitless errands'; as 'separated and distantly-situated state (of places necessary to be visited, of articles hourly wanted etc.)'; as 'scattered state (as of one's business lying in several parts or places): unsettledness or dissipation of mind'.

To conclude: According to Bayly, the growth of pilgrimage 'reflected the unity conferred on India through the consolidation of the Mughal Empire' (Bayly 2010: III, 142). Unlike him, Rao and Subrahmaniam were unable to trace Tamil or Telugu texts prior to 1830 that would be related to travel practices in these regions. Nevertheless, they came to the conclusion that it was 'the East India Company that held

9 This assumption does not correspond with the data on Mysore based Lingayats who maintained a major institution (*maṭh*) in Benares that expanded during the years 1707 to 1780. 'It purchased more urban property in Benares, having already established itself in Gaya and Allahabad' (Bayly 2010: II, 141).

10 'Why was there no travel-literature in Tamil or Telugu in an earlier period?' (Rao and Subrahmanyam 2006: 308). The authors analyse a Telugu text entitled *Kashiyatra charitra* published in 1838, never mentioning that the itinerary of Enugulu Virasvami, a Brahman and Madras court interpreter, resembles the *tristha!ī-yātrā* of Serfoji II, a Maratha prince of Thanjavur, which the latter had undertaken about a decade earlier, after almost two years of intensive correspondence with British authorities in Madras.

11 These documents and narratives as published in Apte 1919; Bhagvat 1905; Gadgil 1883; Godse 1974; Joshi 1939; Khare 1898–1899, 1909, 1912; Mahadick 1951; Pantsachiv 1936, 1939; Sardesai 1933, 1934; Tryambakkar 1964, etc., etc. and found in manuscripts provided a source material for my study 'Mobility and Endeavour: Theory and Practice of Tīrtha-Yātrā' (2008, in Russian). Parts of this study are available in English (Glushkova 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008, 2009, forthc. a, forthc. b).

the space together, provided security, and was the guarantor of traditional circulation of water from Kashi to Rameshvaram' (Rao and Subrahmaniam 2006: 355). Thus they bring us back to the geopolitical dimensions of the 'Maharashtra dharma' as conceived in the earliest of the Maharashtrian chronicles. Contrary to Bayly and Rao and Subrahmaniam, whose judgments reflect their regional bias, my 'alternative view' shows the actual practice of *tristhaḷī-yātrā* by the Marathi-speaking community, and not merely its awareness of this idea, to have been a product, first, of ongoing contacts of the Maharashtrian pandits of Banāras with the land of their origin and later of the expansion of the Maratha Confederacy in the eighteenth century led by Maharashtrian Brahmans. Consequently, the guarantor of pilgrimage through much of India was neither the Mughal Empire (though it had been earlier helpful to its Rajput allies) nor the East Indian Company (which was supportive to Indians in their service) but the Maratha Confederacy and its princely states, which provided a geopolitical corridor of safety leading to the Banāras of Marathas' dream which was not destined to become true.

Every time I visit Banāras on a 'scholarly pilgrimage', singling it out from the *tristhaḷī* entity and bridging it from Maharashtra by traveling through former Maratha principalities of Malwa and Hindustan, my 'alternative view' sharpens my vision and cries for a systematic study of the city, not the one known as the 'city of light' but the one which happened once to be a frontier post of 'Maharashtra dharma' and which was looked upon as a creation of the Marathas.

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Walking the Ghāṭs: A measured approach to the Banāras riverfront

Savitri Jalais

The ghāṭs of Banāras immediately came to mind when I decided to undertake a doctoral dissertation in architecture. The ghāṭs are a common architectural device in South Asia present on the edge of water bodies and consisting of steps, terraces, and tiers. In its most basic and everyday function the ghāṭs allow access to water at its very source in a country where there are major problems with water management and distribution and where most of its inhabitants do not have easy access to water. Be it in rural or urban environments one has to go far to draw water from a well, a pond, or a river, or fetch it from a pump or a tap installed by the municipality, one that is shared by the neighboring population. As an architect, I had already studied this architectural device and the spaces built and inhabited around water bodies in the arid regions of west India, in the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan where there was a tradition of water harvesting and where ghāṭs were used to manage the high variations in the water level between the dry season and the monsoons.[1] In Banāras this architecture unfolds on a monumental scale. Here, more than a hundred ghāṭs have been built on the concave bank of the meander formed by the Ganges. The ghāṭs here belong to a different context: they are constructed to manage and withstand the surplus of water and to channel floods, as well as manage the force of the river – the physical as well as symbolic force of the Ganges. Furthermore, the ghāṭs in Banāras are still very much alive and are constantly used, and their popularity explains why they are still today continually being repaired and why new ghāṭs are constructed. This unique gathering which reflects the image of the city is what most attracted me. The space of the ghāṭs welcomes a great number of people, city dwellers, pilgrims, and tourists, who come here for various reasons – to perform ritual and religious rites, to undertake pilgrimages, to fulfill day-to-day domestic duties, all of which call for a descent to the river, as well as those who go there simply for pleasure.

Each ghāṭ corresponds to a segment on the riverbank varying from 30 m to 180 m in length and 10 to 20 m in height. Each ghāṭ was constructed separately, at different periods and by various builders coming from the subcontinent, and each ghāṭ is different, in shape, structure, or dimension. However, in spite of their great het-

1 Few studies exist on this architecture: Pieper 1979, Rötzer 1989, Hegewald 2002, and Livingston 2002.

erogeneity and diversity, the ghāṭs in Banāras are linked to each other and offer a harmonious urban riverfront that forms a public space extending for more than 6 km. It is this aspect which took up all my attention, and my search was motivated by seeking to understand the formal, spatial, and symbolic organization of the ghāṭs in the constitution, the elaboration, and the construction of this urban phenomenon with exceptional dimensions. In this article I wish to emphasize the architectural and urban complexity of this riverfront and the different approaches that I needed to adopt during my fieldwork so as to study, observe, identify, and analyze it. I will center on the paths that have long existed along the riverfront, the paths that connect the city to the river as well as the paths that run along the Ganges.

A multidisciplinary approach

My approach to the ghāṭs revolved around two points, one relating to the interest of my study, the other to information that I managed to obtain. The difficulties in accessing data on the ghāṭs and the city prompted me to use a multidisciplinary approach. Various sources were called upon as necessary in keeping with and to complete my architectural work. To begin with, there is an abundance of documents on the role of Banāras as a sacred Hindu city that have profoundly influenced the historical, religious, and anthropological studies on the city. The ghāṭs of Banāras are mentioned in a multitude of writings on the city, and it is difficult to find one's way in the maze of information on them. It is also challenging to recognize what is history or myth, or to distinguish narrative from fantasy. In 1822 James Prinsep was perhaps the first to start a kind of inventory of the ghāṭs accompanied by beautiful lithographic illustrations. In the many books on Banāras published either collectively or individually, at least one chapter is dedicated to the riverfront: Sherring (1868), Havell (1905), Greaves (1909), Sukul (1974), Eck (1982), Rana P. B. Singh (1993), Swami Medhasananda (2002), Chandramouli (2006), and Julia Hegewald's article in Michell and Singh (2005) to name just a few. Descriptions of the waterfront are full of awe and wonder about the architecture of the temples and palaces. The names of the owners of the most beautiful palaces are mentioned, some historical events are cited, several mythological events are explained in connection with religious rituals or practices. The architecture of the ghāṭs aroused less interest, among art historians and with regard classification of heritage or restoration work undertaken by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).[2] According to Julia Hegewald (2002) this was due to the fact that their architecture is very much alive, still widely used, and it often falls under the responsibility of local communities or temples. Hence the ghāṭs are not catalogued as parts of a heritage on the verge of extinction or in need of restoration. Of all the ghāṭs and palaces present on the riverfront in Banāras, only the Man Mandir Palace has been designated by the ASI as a historical monument, and then merely the palace, not the ghāṭ that is present in front of it.

2 The Archaeological Survey of India, founded in 1861, is a government agency under the Ministry of Culture, responsible for research into and preservation of the country's archaeological heritage.

Only a few studies have been conducted on the architectural and urban aspects of the city of Banāras. A few ghāṭs and palaces had already been studied before but had never been contextualized in association with the city's urban structure and the geographical site. The studies were isolated; no study had been done on the expansion of the entire riverfront. The only plans of ghāṭs that exist were drawn by a team of architects in the 1980s (Couté and Léger 1989). Furthermore, maps of the city are not easily accessible and most have not been updated for more than a century. But more importantly, the dispersion of data in multiple administrative offices renders all work on the urban aspects of the city arduous. Long hours were spent travelling to the different offices. I was sent from one office to another or asked to return the next day or the week after. I had to knock on many doors and acquire countless permits from the different hierarchies to get hold of documents with no certainty of finding them, often in a poor condition, torn, missing, or simply 'washed away.' However, the bureaucrats were always civil even though the person in charge was either not there or unavailable and I was repeatedly asked to wait for a few hours or come back the following day. Photocopying needed another round of requests, so that sometimes it was easier to go directly to the photocopying shop and find, by chance, piles of rough drafts of the same maps.

These multiple detours through the various administrative offices of the city – the Jal Nigam (office for water purification), the Bundhi Division (municipal office undertaking repairs or new constructions of ghāṭs), the Public Works Department (a body for civil engineering), the Varanasi Development Authority (VDA) or the office for tax collection – though laborious enabled me to learn more about the work done by the various departments involved directly or indirectly in the development of the space of the ghāṭs. Thus the long process of collecting source material for my dissertation, which though difficult to access as it was scattered across several offices and archives, proved stimulating. It made me cross several disciplines: geographical data inherent to the site, socio-cultural realities, specific lifestyles and religious rites around the Ganges, historical facts and current public policies due to the aspirations of the builders in the past and the present, as well as the role of public services in the formation and transformation of the Banāras riverfront. It also prompted me to undertake the study of the ghāṭs from the point of view of a number of scales – from the landscape to the urban and architectural scale – in order to understand and analyze the logic behind the formation of this riverfront:

- the scale of the landscape in designing the fluvial and topographic environment;
- the city scale to place it in relation to its urban space and to understand the paths that lead to the river;
- the scale of its division into plots so important in defining the length and breadth of each ghāṭ;
- its structural scale in relation to techniques that were implemented for its construction through ancient hydraulic works as well as recent drafts undertaken by the municipality;

- the architectural scale defined by the space of each ghāṭ as well as the objects placed or inscribed in its space;
- the scale of urban furniture in relation to the uses and functions of the ghāṭs;
- the human scale (of each step for example) designed with respect to the human body.

Exploring these various scales was necessary in order to understand the ghāṭ as a spatial device, a device for architectural, urban as well as landscape design, and most importantly as a device that adapts to these different scales and articulates them to create an organized and coherent riverfront.

Map hunting

Firstly, my study focused on the development of the waterfront in relation to the geographical phenomenon of a river, its physical particularities, and its concrete form. It encompassed multiple temporalities and paid particular attention to the elements that have persisted for ages: the streets and urban networks, their orientation in regard to the direction of the river, and their impact on the shape of each ghāṭ. In this respect, it is important to mention the initial role of a site in ensuring urban continuity. According to Borie et al. (1976: 8):

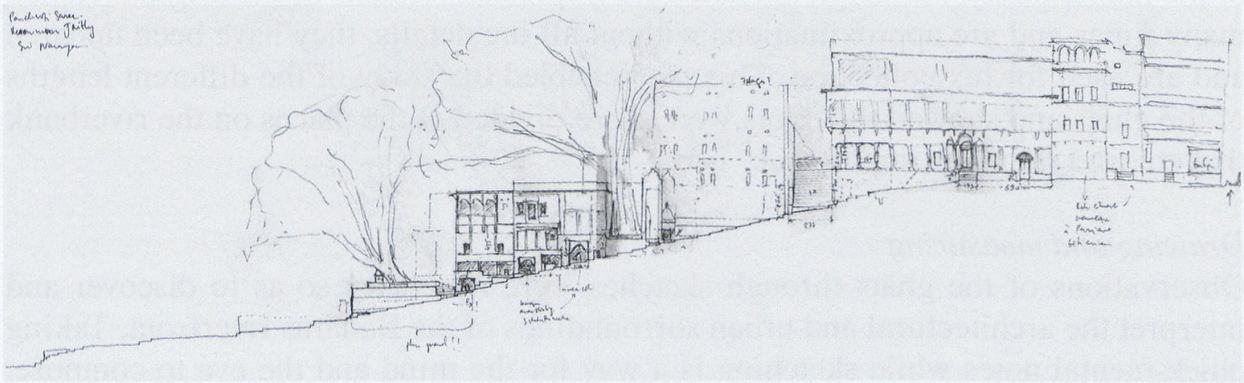
> Among the various factors that are decisive in urban formalization, the site has the characteristic (obvious yet essential) of existing prior to any intervention and of becoming more or less modified as a result of each urban development. The topographical site acts as a basis, it is the first form that acts as an agent of transmission vis-à-vis the various interpretations that develop and are superimposed on it.[3]

In a geographical context continually subjected to the forces of a river, the ghāṭ is only a small part of the landscape and has a temporary existence. It is an architectural element that is modeled according to the terrain, the seasons, and the river environment and it is constantly subjected to its forces following a regular process of construction and destruction.

The initial aim of my fieldwork was to become familiar with the site's complexity and geography. It was not to obtain a complete knowledge of the site but to identify the characteristics that lead to an understanding of space and help define the elements in the landscape that are visible on each ghāṭ. On an urban scale, cartographic research was needed to compare different fragments of plans, necessary tools to study the evolution of the city, to point out the elements that are permanent, those that have been substituted, elements that were added and those that have disappeared, in order to establish the relationship between the shape of the site and the development of the riverbank. For example, I superimposed the city's topographical maps onto urban layout maps. Maps showing the contours, the hydrology, or the nature of the soil were overlaid on those corresponding to the city's sewage system or street network. This overlap illustrated a

3 Translated from the French by the author.

close relationship between the important streets and the original thalwegs, as most of the streets follow the course of ancient rivulets (*nālā*) flowing towards the river. Today, many of these rivulets are underground sewers covered with paths. At least twenty such sewer drains discharge into the Ganges and many are identified by the massive sewer pumps constructed along the ghāṭs: at Teliyānālā Ghāṭ, at Rājārājeśvarī Ghāṭ, at Daśāśvamedh Ghāṭ, at Mānsarovar Ghāṭ and at Hariścandra Ghāṭ. The most famous example is the Godaulia *nālā* that was buried in the nineteenth century. The path that covers it today leads to the Daśāśvamedh Ghāṭ, one of the most important pilgrimage sites on the riverfront.



Gāyghāṭ

I scrutinized the permanent elements that have structured the city through the study of its hydrological network and inundated areas. The presence of old sewers, for example, helped explain the structure of the city and the origins of the street formation.[4] Current questions referring to the cleaning of the Ganges and the need to treat the sewers that are discharged into the river provided information on the city's sewage system and helped me to gather maps related to them as well as studies concerning the development of the sewage network, speeches by bureaucrats or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and complaints voiced by the inhabitants of the city.[5] Many departments have been working in this field, particularly the Indian Ministry of Environment and Forests through the National Ganga River Basin Authority, the Sankat Mochan Foundation founded by Veer Bhadra Mishra who began the Swatcha Ganga Campaign (literally the campaign for pure water), and the Ganga Action Plan that was begun by the national government two decades ago.

Most of the plans collected do not exceed the 1/10,000 scale, offering only a general comprehension of the topography. The old map drawn by James Prinsep in 1821 at the scale of 1/5,000, for his 'amusement'[6] and a more detailed map drawn in 1928

4 This method was used by Bernard Rouleau for the study of the streets of Paris (1988).

5 For further reading see Alley 2002.

6 'I had vowed to do nothing until I had accomplished my never ending map of Banāras. And with a work of labour undertaken as a work of pleasure, it is almost necessary to make a bond with yourself not to use your liberty of giving it up as soon as it becomes mere labour. In this only way have I brought it to a conclusion.' Prinsep's letter to his father, in O. P. Kej-

at the scale of 64 inch/mile (1/990)[7] give better information on the shape of the ghāṭs and their links with the streets and built elements of the city. However, drawn nearly two hundred and one hundred years ago respectively, the maps are today quite obsolete because of the incessant construction and reconstruction of the riverbank. These maps have never been updated and a new map recently drawn by computer (using CAD software) is only a bad version of the 1928 map. Fragments of a plot plan of the nineteenth century were found. They were either copies of the original 'Revenue Survey Map of Banaras,' drawn in 1883–4 at a scale of 32 feet/mile (1:1980) and recently published,[8] or schematic hand-drawn copies found in the tax collecting offices of the municipality. Although the latter are imprecise versions of the original copied many times and are approximations without all the details, they have been updated and are used for tax collection. This plan enabled the study of the different lengths of the ghāṭs and showed that plots were more divided at the places on the riverbank that enjoyed religious importance.

Drawing and measuring

Observations of the ghāṭs through sketches were necessary so as to discover and interpret the architectural and urban surroundings of the Banāras riverfront. Taking quick mental notes while sketching is a way for the mind and the eye to compose, interconnect, and understand the logic of a particular space.[9] Rough sketches sometimes express the composition, complexities, and logic of a space more accurately and pertinently than a plethora of words. Drawing was a direct way to observe and understand the layout of the ghāṭ and to become absorbed by the place and its daily use by different people and communities. Furthermore, they allow more direct exchanges with the inhabitants and the local ghāṭ population, as a drawing is easily understood (by the general public) and more accessible than writing. The interest and curiosity that my presence as a stranger aroused was redirected to the drawing, so I was easily associated with the space and architecture that these drawings represented. A drawing requires time, and the time spent sketching, as opposed to taking a photograph, helped me to gradually understand the ghāṭ space and, to a certain extent, become part of it. I became accustomed to the different elements and functions of the ghāṭ and simultaneously my presence became more familiar to the people who came to the ghāṭs everyday.

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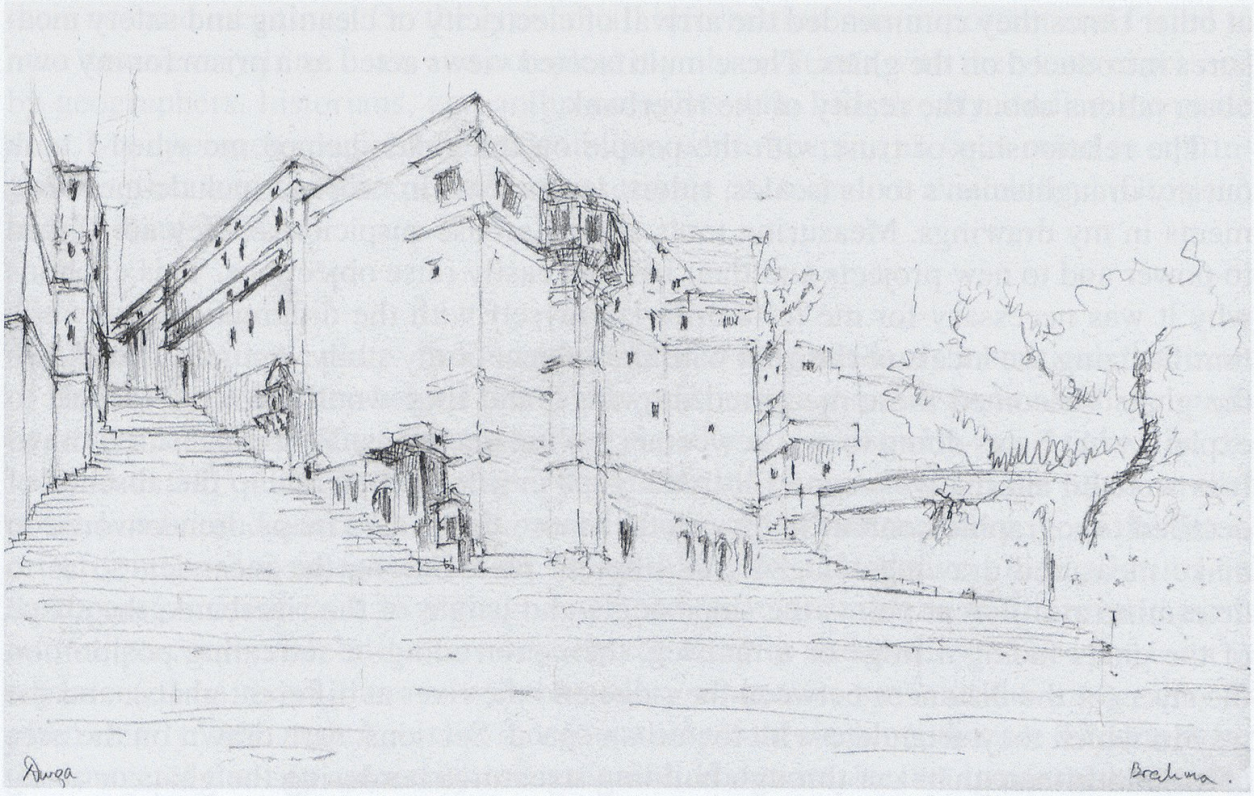
riwal's introduction to the new edition of *Banāras Illustrated* (2004: 9.) This was the first topographical map in the history of Banāras.

7 Banāras City, Survey 1928–29, 22 sheets.

8 Two sheets of the original are today conserved at the University of Heidelberg and have been published in Gutschow 2006: 470–71.

9 As pointed out by Philippe Prost (2007: 52), the French language in the seventeenth century did not distinguish the words *dessein* (design) and *dessin* (drawing). The drawing is included in the design and vice versa. It is a tool to solve problems and raise issues to observe and reflect: 'We are not speaking of representation but of purpose, of the intelligence we have of the site as that of a project and that understanding of things necessarily involves the sketch.'



Durgāghāṭ

The many hours and days spent drawing at the same ghāṭ, and returning to the same place, enabled mutual trust to develop with the people familiar with the ghāṭ – especially the *chaiwalas* and the boatmen – a trust that deepened thanks to the subject of my work – the ghāṭs – old heritage structures, solid and beautiful, the pride of all Banārasīs. Thus I was allowed to enter the privacy of the people's daily lives, my presence becoming slowly part of the decor, with the purpose, although limited, of drawing and studying the architecture of the ghāṭs. From behind my drawings, it was easier to observe the daily occupations of the people there: the work of barbers, washmen, boatmen or priests, the bathing and dressing carried out by the locals, or the ablutions and *piṇḍādān* performed by the pilgrims. On more specific occasions, I witnessed the rites offered to the dead before they were taken to the cremation ghāṭ, the vows made by newly married couples through offerings made to Mother Gaṅgā, festivals such as *śṛṅgārs*, *dīpāvalī*, or *devdīpāvalī*. My drawings attracted many passers-by and it was my way to make contact and to hear them speak about the place. I invariably spoke with men because they are the ones who come more regularly to the ghāṭs. Women come and go, they do not stop at the ghāṭ, while for many men – boatmen, priests, barbers, vendors, etc. – this is their domain. I tried to make conversation about the person's everyday life. They would explain the sacred nature of the ghāṭs, narrate its myths, describe the festivities and their preparations, depict the construction of a particular ghāṭ, or vituperate or praise government works on the ghāṭs. Sometimes they expressed annoyance with the sewage problems of the city and the pollution of the river or complained about how dirty the ghāṭs are, while

at other times they commended the arrival of electricity or cleaning and safety measures introduced on the ghāṭs. These multifaceted views acted as a prism for my own observations about the reality of the riverbank.

The relationship of trust with the people on the ghāṭs, helped me when I took out my draughtsman's tools (scales, rulers, lasers, etc.) in order to include measurements in my drawings. Measuring tools always arouse suspicion as they are linked to power and to new projects and their use can easily raise objections. This explains why it was necessary for me to familiarize myself with the different places, while familiarizing the locals of the ghāṭ with the subject of my study. Actually, people on the ghāṭs welcomed these measured drawings, and they would take the trouble to explain what I was doing to any newcomer asking questions. These measured drawings were an alternative way to fill in the gaps in information due to the absence of detailed topographic contour maps or other more up-to-date maps. I endeavored to make measured drawings of ghāṭs at different places along the meander, so as to determine at different points the slope angle and height of the riverbank, the shape of the ghāṭs facing a ridge or a thalweg, their protruding or retreating position on the river (or the distances between the ridge and the river at different ghāṭs), and the way in which they articulate with the urban space. Sections were drawn on the area of around fifteen ghāṭs cut through building structures bordering the ghāṭs or along the passages running perpendicular to the river. They were measured from the water level (as it was in the month of February both in 2009 and 2010) to the highest level in the city or at least until the first bazaar lane.

I was attentive to the height of the steps (which were not always constant and varied according to the period when they were constructed) and to the topography of the terrain. There were steps and terraces as well as thresholds, passages, crossings, plazas of all sizes, platforms, hanging terraces, temples, palaces or simple houses, open galleries, and cells along the river. I noted down their location on the ghāṭ space, their dimensions, and the different activities they hosted, adding to these spatial characteristics brief notes on their symbolic meanings or significance. These architectural surveys, sketches, and drawings represented the site more or less exactly, and helped me grasp its original traits so as to allow for analysis of the different logic behind the building of the ghāṭ. Most of my initial questions linked to the erection of Banāras' riverfront originate from these drawings.

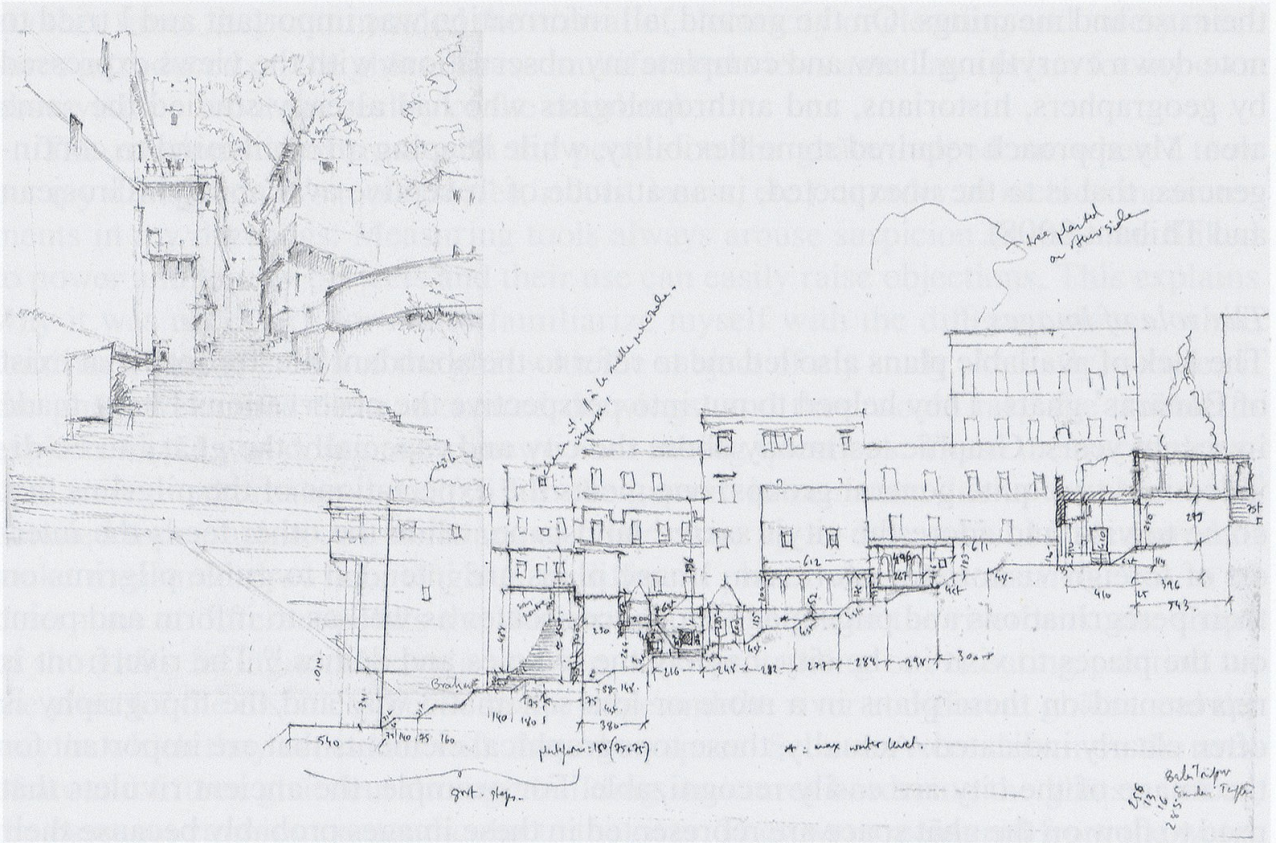
In order to understand how this riverfront emerged it was necessary to recognize the particular elements and trace how they were integrated into the whole complex. Do each ghāṭ and each element that constitutes it have a geographical, a historical, or a cultural particularity that explains its origin and evolution? To consider each ghāṭ with regard to the whole allowed me to understand its significant value in the composition of the riverfront. The overall analysis of the riverfront as an entity required a description of a few ghāṭs, a few places and objects, and to single out the character that makes each ghāṭ particular, or those elements that are recurrent in a number of ghāṭs. I identified the elements that have contributed to the construction and development of this front, observed, drew, measured, and recorded them, while describing

their use and meanings. On the ground, all information was important and I tried to note down everything I saw and complete my observations with the views expressed by geographers, historians, and anthropologists who had already studied the same area. My approach required some flexibility, while keeping an open mind to contingencies, that is to the unexpected, in an attitude of 'receptive availability' (Grosjean and Thibaut 2008).

The role of images

The lack of available plans also led me to refer to the abundant illustrations that exist of Banāras' ghāṭs. They helped to put into perspective the observations I have made in recent years. Graphic testimony about the city and especially the ghāṭ can be divided into two quite general groups: one meets the expectations of the pilgrims that come to visit and adore the city's sacred landscape, while the other feeds the interest of foreign visitors for exoticism. Image plans are intended to guide pilgrims on their peregrinations and pilgrimage sequences/routes as well as to inform and point out the places to visit in the city, namely the temples and deities.[10] The riverfront is represented on these plans in a more or less schematic way and the topography is often clearly indicated. Actually, those topographical elements that are important for the image of the city are easily recognizable. For example, the ancient rivulets that used to flow on the ghāṭ space are represented in these images probably because their presence sanctified the place and the ghāṭ and we can see that these specific places are still filled with significance today.

10 Gutschow (2006) has analysed these illustrations, as have Jörg Gengnagel and the research team for *Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual* and the *Varanasi Research Project – Visualised Space*, of the University of Heidelberg.



Brahmāghāṭ

Those illustrations that belong to Western forms of representation – panoramas, engravings from drawings and photographs, watercolors and oils – were executed by travelers, often European, who had visited the city since the late eighteenth century and who were often missionaries, tradesmen, or people in the service of the East India Company. Among these travelers professional designers, called landscape artists, were invited to come and draw the glorious projects of neo-classical colonial cities. They often discovered, at the fringes of the colonial neighborhoods, in the vernacular, a picturesque quality and a certain exoticism they were happy to take home (Tillotson 1990). Thus, aquatints and paintings by Thomas and William Daniell of the late eighteenth century, paintings by William Hodges published in *Select Views in India* in 1798, the paintings of Sir Charles Oyly, William Wood, and J. B. Fraser, and the drawings of James Prinsep in the early nineteenth century show multiple scenes of Banāras' ghāṭs, palaces and temples. Louis Rousselet, a French traveler, took some of the first photos of the city that were transformed into etchings so as to be easily printed in his travel accounts (1874: 113–28).

These many illustrators have repeatedly experienced the city or the architecture of the riverfront through images. My study contributes to this corpus with the aim of analysis. I try to see beyond the simple facade of the riverfront in order to understand the volume, that which is palpable, the space and that which is lived in. My drawings attempt to identify the spatial characteristics and nature of the place. This assumes a singular representation that highlights some aspects and omits others depending on

the scale observed. I sketched the ghāṭ so as to better appropriate it, touch it, scan its surface, trace its edges, and explore its textures.[11] I looked at the space being built, modified, maintained, and constantly produced in a dialectical relationship with its environment already dense with symbol and meaning. I tried to document the changes operating on this space as the months passed by: a way to 'look at time.' I identified traces of the past: construction techniques, materials, shapes, forms, and symbols. Finally, I looked at ways of using and appropriating the space of the ghāṭs, the void where the life of a society is enacted. A void defined by objects, palaces, trees, platforms and especially the escarpment on one side and the river on the other – elements all symbolic that make the built-up area reflect the individuals, groups and society (Caniglia and Signorelli 2007). Through these observations, I could explain the materialization of Banāras' riverfront and all the elements present as designed, arranged and drawn by the user, through the different practices as well as the many symbolic trajectories that surround it.

Ghāṭs designed by symbolic trajectories

In Banāras, the steps of the ghāṭs link the city level to the lowest river water level. They adapt to the variations in the water level of the river and to the riverbank topography. Whatever the river water level – which varies between 5 and 20 meters every year – access to the river water is made possible. Whatever the relief, steep or gradual, comfortable or slippery, the steps of the ghāṭs are ways of accessing the purifying river water and the return climb to the city and, for the numerous Hindu devotees, to its numerous temples. Illustrations from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries[12] and the 1822 plan by Prinsep show the presence of numerous ghāṭs that lead the way to the riverbank, intermittently, in specific places, allowing access from the city, an urban milieu, to the immersions in the river waters. To walk down to the Ganges and be immersed in its water is part of a purification rite necessary before entering a temple, an *akhāṛā* (gymnasium), a shrine, or any sacred space. Furthermore, water from the Ganges is crucial for cleaning and purifying and for the daily rites celebrated in the temple – such as the *abhiṣeka* or the bathing of the divinities. As access to water through the ghāṭs is safer and cleaner, the first ghāṭs on the riverfront were simply paths with steps that linked the river to the temple.[13] The paths were often constructed at the same time as the temples and whenever a temple was repaired the adjoining path and the ghāṭ would be repaired too. A few ghāṭs eventually took the name of the temple to which they were connected, for example Cauṃsaṭhī Ghāṭ was linked to the Cauṃsaṭhī Devī temple. Examples of ghāṭs that lead to passages and temples exist in other South Asian cities – the temple cities in the south of India or even in a metropolitan city like Calcutta. These are often isolated passages to water;

11 The act of looking as described in Arnheim 1969.

12 Mainly panoramas of the riverfront. See Krishna 2003 and Gutschow 2006.

13 Pieper (1979) compares the path which, in South Asian towns, leads from the temple to the purifying water to the central square which brings together the city dwellers in Western cities.

they do not extend or develop into a riverfront as in Banāras. According to Jacques Gaucher, the remoteness of a river in an urban milieu was often the cause for the creation of a specific path, regularly crossed by the elephant or the priest in charge of transporting the holy waters (Gaucher 2007: 52).

The steps of the ghāṭs can be dangerous as is confirmed by the famous popular saying: 'In case one wishes to serve in Banāras, one has to avoid *ran* (widows), *saanrh* (sacred bulls), *sirhi* (steps), and *sannyasi* (actually fake *sannyasis*) as the city is full of these risks.'[14] The act of climbing steep stairs resembles the act of ascending a mountain[15] or a difficult path that a pilgrim performs on many other pilgrimage sites to obtain salvation.[16] By analogy, the construction of these steps is also salutary, and many elite patrons constructed ghāṭs for their own salvation. On an inscription from the Chandela period (tenth to thirteenth century AD) found in Deogarh (in the south of the state of Uttar Pradesh), the biographer Kirtivarman said about the king Vatsa Raja that he had made ghāṭs 'in order to make his bright fame ascend up into the universe.'[17] Examples of steep passages can be found in the Himalayas and in the peninsula of Kathiawad (in Gujarat) where spectacular flights of stairs allow access to the holy mountains of the Jains at Palitana and of the Hindus at Girnar and Junagadh (Tod 1822: 281–84, 369).

As Jean Deloche (1980 : 102) reminds us: 'The tradition of linking the various sanctuaries in a sacred place by a path built in stone or by stairs cut out in the rock, when it is located on a hill, has been carried on throughout the ages, works of religious communities or of rich pilgrims.' The ghāṭs are often called *tīrthas*, originating from a Sanskrit verb meaning 'to cross over.'[18] It designates a passage or a ford and represents an intermediary space, a place of departure and the end of a stage between life and death; devotees walk down the ghāṭs to be immersed in the waters and to symbolically undertake this journey. Actually, the entire city represents this passage, and pilgrims embark on a pilgrimage to Kāśī (Banāras' religious appellation), called the Mahātīrtha – the great passage or pilgrimage – at least once in their lifetime or are brought here at death to be cremated on the riverbank. It is thought to be auspicious to come to die in the city because by dying or being cremated in Banāras one supposedly gains 'liberation' from the cycles of reincarnation. Thus the ghāṭ as a sign made physically manifest symbolizes *tīrthas*, pilgrimage sites, and the descent to purifying waters.

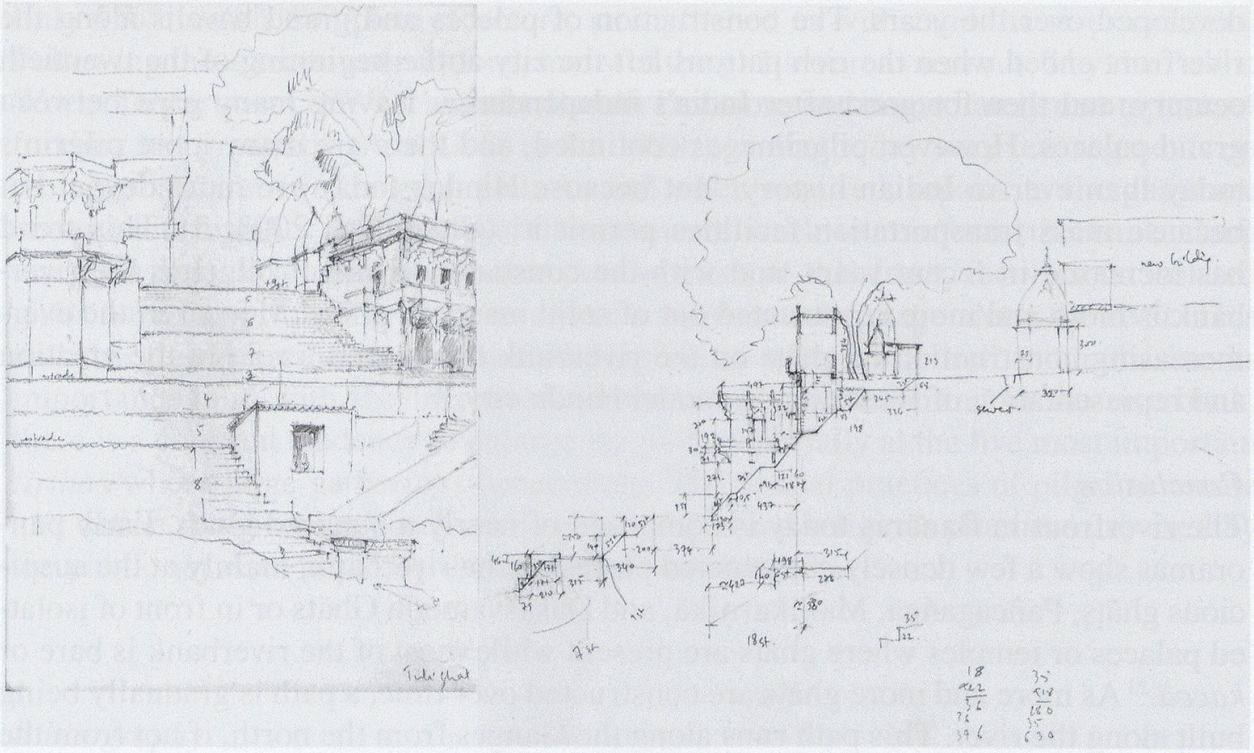
14 See Krishna 2003: 6 and Prinsep 1996: 18.

15 Another meaning for the word *ghāṭ* in Sanskrit is mountain pass.

16 Fuller 1992, Hegewald 2002: 67, and Deloche 1980.

17 Chandela inscription, no. B, on Deogarh rock. Inscription of Kirtivarman, v. 7, Ind. Ant., Vol. XVIII, pp. 238–9, quoted in *An Encyclopedia of Hindu Architecture*, Manasara series vol. vii. London: Oxford University Press, 1946, p. 168.

18 From the word *tṝ/tārati* meaning a passage. The *tāraka mantra* that Siva insufflates to the dead before his last journey finds its origin in the same word. See Eck 1981.



Tulsīghāṭ

The other symbolic trajectory in the city is performed along the riverbank. The riverbank is the most constant limit of the city,[19] because the city never crossed over to the other side of the river. It is a limit that constantly extends beyond its southern border. This limit, like any periphery, is thought to be vulnerable, in need of protection, and this is why the protective divinities are concentrated along this limit and along the riverbank, i.e. the Viṇāyakas, the Bhairavas, the Vetālas, and the Śaktis.[20] Pilgrimages around this limit is a way of visiting these divinities, to have their *darśan* and implore their protection. Three of the main pilgrimages of the city take place on the ghāṭ space along the Ganges: the Pañcakrośīyātrā, the Vārāṇasīpradakṣinapaṭha, and the Avimuktayātrā.[21] Only the Antargṛhayātrā around Viśveśvar temple is within the city and does not lie on the ghāṭ path. However, before undertaking this pilgrimage, pilgrims come to bathe at Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ and thus connect with the sacred river through the ghāṭ. This pilgrimage is part of an ancient practice that has been

19 Be it in the sixth century when the city, apparently quadrangular in shape and one *krośa* in length, was situated at the confluence of the Varuna river, or in the twelfth century when the sacred domain of the city extended to nearly five *krośa*s as it still does today, the riverbank has always been the limit of the city.

20 See Eck 1982 and Gutschow 2006.

21 The Avimuktayātrā encircling the Avimuktakṣetra or 'the domain never abandoned by Siva' extends from Trilocan Ghāṭ to Kedār Ghāṭ. The Vārāṇasīpradakṣiṇapatha or Nagarapradakṣiṇa falls within the two frontier rivers – the Varuna and the Assi. The Pañcakrośīyātrā extends largely outside the limits of the city formed by these two rivers and encloses a perimeter that falls beyond the western limit of the city.

developed over the years. The construction of palaces and grand havelis along the riverfront ended when the rich patrons left the city at the beginning of the twentieth century, and then for good after India's independence, leaving many gaps between grand palaces. However, pilgrimages continued, and there are many more pilgrims today than ever in Indian history, 'not because Hindus today are more devout but because mass transportation facilities permit it' (Bharadwaj 2003: 5). This trend has increased in recent years, and with the constant arrivals of pilgrims the riverbank is more and more constructed out of solid masonry ghāṭs. Moreover, the ever-increasing construction of ghāṭs on the riverbank has played a role in the creation and representation of Banāras as a model Hindu city.[22]

Conclusion

The riverfront in Banāras today is composed of nearly a hundred ghāṭs. Early panoramas show a few densely constructed places on the riverbank, mainly at the auspicious ghāṭs, Pañcagaṅgā, Maṇikarṇikā, and Daśāśvamedh Ghāts or in front of isolated palaces or temples where ghāṭs are present while most of the riverbank is bare or *kaccā*.[23] As more and more ghāṭs are constructed over time, a path is gradually being built along the river. This path runs along the Ganges from the north, if not from the confluence of the Varuna at least from Rāj Ghāṭ, and extends to the south at the confluence of the Assi *nālā*. According to the character of the ghāṭ and the topography of the place, the path is situated along a landing in the ghāṭ 'stairway,' an enlarged space or a narrow passage. Depending on the water level, it is above the river or submerged in it, and depending on the season either very crowded or empty. Even before the construction of most of the ghāṭs there was an earth path traced along the bank. This path, indicated in dotted lines on the 1928 map, is called the Pañcakrośī *patha* named after the popular pilgrimage and is included in the area of each ghāṭ, be they bare or built in solid stone. The existence of this original path might explain why the riverfront was developed. Just as the path between the temple and the river paved a ghāṭ, so too has the ritual path of the Pañcakrośī always been integrated in the development of the riverfront. The steps of the new ghāṭs are adjusted to old adjacent ghāṭs, catching up with the different levels between them and creating a continuity thus linking the different ghāṭs and leading the flux of passers-by and pilgrims over a succession of varied ghāṭs.

At the beginning of the twentieth century many hydraulic theories were put forward to construct the entire ghāṭ, first of all to maintain the stability of the bank, and secondly to protect existing ghāṭs from damage. According to engineers at the time: 'The crescent of the ghāṭs is like an arch and the weakness of a single spot on it is apt to undermine the strength of the whole.'[24] Hence one of the preventive measures proposed was to build a continuous line of ghāṭs; every individual ghāṭ was to be

22 See Desai 2003.

23 See Swami Medhasananda 2002, for the number of ghāṭs through the ages.

24 *Banāras and Its Ghāṭs*, 1931, p. i.

linked to create a complete structure, strengthened to withstand the river currents. Following these recommendations, many of the ghāṭs were constructed by the Public Works Department (PWD) and the Bundh Division, not immediately due to lack of funding but gradually (Assī Ghāṭ in the 1980s), so that today very few segments on the riverbank remain undeveloped. As and when required, repairs to the ghāṭs are undertaken together with an overall scheme of work to reinforce the bank along a regular line. With the progressive development of this front, the various isolated ghāṭs have been linked in order to create a continuous passage along the river. This path is often described as a 'road' in English or *mārga* in Hindi to emphasize its importance, and with the increased number of pilgrims coming to the riverbank, there is a constant tendency to enlarge the path, especially at the five most important *tīrthas* where large gatherings concentrate. The spatial practices of pilgrims create and define the sacred space,[25] while pilgrimages and religious practices are used by the public services to justify the work done on the ghāṭs.

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25 See Gengnagel 2006: 159.

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Storming Citadels

Vasudha Dalmia

Of my first visit to Kāśī as a four-year-old in the early 1950s, I have dim memories. Of a house perched high on one of the many ghāṭs lining the river, white marble interiors, my parents talking to an ancient grandmother with a deeply lined face, and my baby sister Yashodhara, awaiting her first ritual tonsure on the banks of the Gaṅgā. A city of death and of new life. A 'classic' image, we could say, of a 'classic' city.

A few years later, it must have been in 1957, my grandmother died in that marble interior, constructed to house her in her last years. Two paternal aunts would follow the same route to the other world. When Yashodhara and I, accompanied by my partner and little daughter, visited the house in the mid-1970s, the younger of the two aunts still lived there. We had only known her in her joyless widow's white. Despite her apparent disapproval, she didn't scold us, as the other elderly women in the family did, for cutting our hair, for the way we dressed, the way we talked. She busied herself with *satsaṅg*, uplifting group activity, with the many other women in white who came to sing joyless *bhajan*s in the evenings.

The city fascinated us, even as its dirt repelled us. The wide riverside terraces of my grandmother's house were haunted by monkeys, boats-people lived in its lower, roofed terrace, we could hear them singing in the evenings. The marble courtyard of the house was filled with miniature Śiva temples, with lingams in their inner sanctums and Nandis posted outside. And there was that view of the ghāṭ, with a lone sadhu or two and the silent river, the sandy, unpeopled banks on the other side shoring up the timelessness we associated with the Gaṅgā. The spectacular evening āratī in the Viśvanāth Temple performed by shaven priests only reinforced the image – of death, solemnity, filth, and holy grandeur. In 1978, Yashodhara and I would carry the urn containing my father's ashes to the city and immerse it in the river.

By this time, in the late 1970s, I had lived in Germany for many years, and was writing a doctoral dissertation on Bertolt Brecht and the impact of his theatre in North India, particularly the Hindi-speaking belt, with Delhi at its centre. It was then, as part of the quest to understand the beginning of modern Hindi theatre, that I alighted upon Bharatendu Harishchandra, the young merchant prince of late nineteenth century Banāras, who had, so to speak, 'fathered' modern Hindi. Of the three thick volumes of his *Granthāvalī* or collected works, one was entirely devoted to drama – of many kinds, farces, comedies, history plays, translations from Sanskrit and English. Harishchandra had wished to see his plays performed; he had acted in

one or two of them on the amateur stage he himself had ushered into being; but the Hindi belt, which was just coming into its own, entirely lacked the kind of audiences the theatres in the Presidency port cities of Calcutta and Bombay could command. Performance culture in North India still existed in the salons of courtesans or in the streets. Harishchandra's plays lived on in print, even if the theatre he envisioned could not come into being. I wrote my dissertation and obtained my degree. His works formed one short chapter in a work focused on contemporary drama, which took me to theatres in Germany, to the Brecht Archives in East Berlin, in order to better understand Brecht, and to many different kinds of performances in Delhi and North India. Harishchandra's Banāras remained hazy, of little further interest.

What took me to Banāras again to look for completely different things, things that I could never have associated with that city? When I started working in Tübingen at the Institute for Indology and the Comparative Study of Religions in the mid-1980s, and turned to teaching Hindi and modern Hinduism, while looking for the modernist turn in traditionalist, rather than reformist, religious discourse of the nineteenth century, I once again alighted upon Harishchandra. This merchant prince, known as much for his extravagant life style as for his generosity, was not only writing sharp-tongued satirical plays, not only reading and translating Shakespeare and experimenting with a variety of genres, all of which I could relate to, given my undergraduate training in English literature, he was also offering an overarching scheme for a national religion rooted in Vaiṣṇava Bhakti. In our childhood, we had taken a series of exams on the works of Tulsīdās. This exercise was part of our Marwari legacy, of belonging to a family closely related to Hanuman Prasad Poddar and the Gita Press. There were ways, then, to relate to this modernizing bhakti culture even if years of westernized education had alienated us from this heritage.

The first reading of Harishchandra's texts on religion – poems, essays, and tracts – offered a puzzle, they seemed to be going both ways, towards openness and closure. Could we hope to find a more generous vision of Hinduism at this early stage of nationalist thought? Or were these the first traces of the Hindu communalism that seemed all set to tear the country apart in the late 1980s and early 1990s? I went first to what was then the India Office Library in London, to catalogues, librarians, and archivists ready to help scholars. The material I found there opened up a whole new world. James Prinsep's *Benares Illustrated* (1831–1832) not only offered glimpses of fine architecture, of the roof terrace of Kaśmīrī Mal's grand merchant house, portraits of courtesans and courtiers, of Buṛhvā Maṅgal, the river-festival with its procession of decorated barges, of narrow city lanes lined with shops, it was also an illustration of the British presence in Banāras and of an encounter with two ways of thinking. I had visited those crowded lanes with no inkling of the layers of modern history embedded in them. Harishchandra emerged from this world, from the Anglicization of education which overtook the Benares Sanskrit College in the 1830s, from the lectures and discussions held in the newly founded Benares Institute, between city literati and British officers and missionaries. The stray issues of Harishchandra's pioneering Hindi journals of the 1870s and early 1880s provided

some sense of the wider network of his addressees, the Hindi enthusiasts scattered across the North West Provinces. What had come together in Banāras in the decades following the Uprising of 1857, so that it became the cultural capital of the new Hindi-Hindu world of North India, a position it was to retain till well into the 1930s when the scene shifted to Allahabad? It was becoming increasingly clear that I would have to go to Banāras, to work out the links between literature, performance, religion, politics, and modernity. For this conglomerate was connected to me, to us, late twentieth century moderns, looking for the roots of our modernity and all that lay beyond, in both directions, past and present. Yet, I must confess that I somewhat dreaded this encounter with the city. Would I find people who would scold as the aunts had scolded?

My sister Ila, so intimately connected to the Hindi cultural world, mediated access to Rai Anand Krishna, Professor Emeritus of Art History, who invited me to stay with him and his family. It took me only a few days in Sītā Nivās, their tree-shaded residence on the Benares Hindu University campus, to realize that I had found the kind of resource I was looking for – of knowledge, warmth, and hospitality. From Raja Bhaiya, as Anand Krishnaji was known to his family and friends, and from his family, I learnt most of what I know about Benares. He was not only an art historian, as at home in the world of Maurya sculpture as in Mughal and Rajput miniature painting, his deep love and knowledge of music, literature, culture at large, and his family history connected him to so many in the city. Rai Krishnadas, Raja Bhaiya's father, one of Harishchandra's nephews, had given his rich collection of art works to Bhārat Kalā Bhavan, the university art museum of which he was both founder and first director. He had been at the heart of a vibrant circle of writers, artists, intellectuals, and the stray visitor from Europe who could not tear herself away from the holy city, such as Alice Boner and Alain Daniélou.

Banāras grew on me, as I began to view it through Harishchandra's eyes. He had loved his city which he knew inside-out; he eulogized its learning, ancient and modern, the gleaming towers and palaces that adorned the ghāṭs in his play *Satya Harishchandra* (1875); though he had little illusion about its darker under-belly, its rogues and thieves, Brahmin and non-Brahmin, who pervaded temple, ghāṭ and the newly built railway station at Mughal Sarai. The city was holy, the city was unholy, and he showed as much in the skits he collected under the telling title, *Prem Joginī: Kāśī ke chāyācitra athāt Kāśī ke do bhale-buṛe fotograf,* written at the same time, from 1874 to 1875, and published in 1876. In the brief span of his life, Harishchandra literally called Hindi literature into being. He created lilting prose in a language just beginning to find its feet and gave it a body of work which would help find some kind of legitimacy for Hindi in the family of modern Indian languages, so that it could stake its claim as the national language in the not-yet-existent nation.

The archives of Bhārat Kalā Bhavan proved to be an enormous resource for me. Anand Krishnaji also mediated access to Rāmnagar palace and fort. The Mahārājā, deeply engaged with tradition, welcomed my work, as also Harishchandra's heirs in Bhāratendu Bhavan, who provided much information and photocopies of older

material. However, it was in Dr. Dhirendranath Singh, who lived, oh wonder of wonders, in a little house right opposite my grandmother's on Gāyghāṭ, that I found my comrade-in-arms. No one lived in my grandmother's house where the portraits of various family members hung gloomily in various deserted rooms; though the courtyard still gleamed with the Śiva temples. The contrast with Dhirenji's tiny house with its miniature courtyard could not have been greater; it was crammed, not only with his family members, but also his many 19th-century books, which threatened to crowd out the family. Dhirenji worked as a senior journalist for the *Aaj* Press in Benares, but in his spare time he edited and annotated books – *Jānakī Maṅgal*, the first play that was performed in the city, *Sundarī Ṭilak,* an anthology of poems collected by Harishchandra, but actually, as Dhirenji showed, by one of his many poet friends, and so on. Dhirenji was deeply steeped in this world, as I could never be. He showed me his Benares and took me to his many haunts, to second-hand book sellers, to Carmichael Library in the heart of the city – the first public library, founded by the educated natives of Banāras in the late nineteenth century – to the library of the Nagarī Pracārinī Sabhā, with its invaluable collection of books and manuscripts, to Benares Sanskrit College (founded in 1791), later Queen's College and today the Sampurṇānand Sanskrit University,) but most of all to his friend Purushottam Modi, proprietor-manager-publisher, to be found always in Viśvavidyālaya Prakashan, his book store on Chauk. Modiji lived not far from Dhirenji; his interest in publishing and supplying books connected to the art, culture, and history of Banāras and his openness to new ideas provided moral support in moments of despair – the overwhelming amount of material, which needed to be sorted, sifted, understood and finally pressed into book form.

What did I find in the vast corpus of work Harishchandra managed to conjure up in the thirty-five years of his existence, and what was the Hinduism that emerged from this brave new world, launching itself, as much being launched, through force of colonial circumstance, into the modern? The answer had begun to stare me in the face; there was no ignoring it. The Hindu-Muslim polarization had unmistakably set in. Not only had Hindi and Urdu forked sharply, all but denying their linguistic origins in the same fount, Hinduism was increasingly consolidating itself into a whole that seemed to need the 'other' in order to project its own identity all the more clearly. Harishchandra's vision of a bhakti-rooted Hinduism was no doubt expansive, seeking to integrate the diverse streams that the forces of modernity were also pushing into some kind of unity, but it was also exclusive. It differentiated itself sharply on many fronts, drawing lines of demarcation from folk belief – from *pīr*s, village and tribal deities – as much as from Islam. The story of the divisive colonial politics that exacerbated and cemented this division is too well known to be rehearsed here again – the 1905 partition of Bengal, Morley-Minto Reforms, a Muslim electorate, climaxing in the communalism of the 1920s. However, this communal Hinduism could not be read back wholesale into the late nineteenth century, a period which still carried traces of the old porous borders of the Mughal era bhakti traditions of the North.

Once I had written my book on Harishchandra, I thought my work in Vārāṇasī was over. In the meantime – we are speaking now of the late 1990s – I found myself at the University of California Berkeley as a Professor of Hindi, looking now to focus on the very Hindi literature of which Harishchandra had laid the foundation. The study of Hindi literature had flourished in Berkeley since the early 1960s. Agyeya had helped to found the fledgling Hindi program there, which flowered all the way to the mid-1980s, when, for a variety of reasons, it trailed off. I have written about this elsewhere. By the time I came to Berkeley, only faint traces of a once vital program survived. Propelled by my work with Harishchandra's periodicals, I resolved that the way forward was to look to contextualize the canonical authors of the twentieth century, and in order to this, my students – three successive generations of them – and I turned to the literary journals of the first half of the twentieth century.

I had taught Premchand and Gandhi in Tübingen, working largely on the plight of the peasants in colonial India. Now I turned to Dalit novels, to the new women writers, to the powerful work of Krishna Sobti, which has emerged in the early 1950s, and discovered the newborn tradition of urban novels in Hindi, which told a story still waiting to be pieced together. Somewhat to my surprise, I found that Premchand's urban literature led straight back to Banāras, another Banāras this time – we were entering the first three decades of the twentieth century – closer in time to Anand Krishnaji and his generation. Though he is himself a *rasika*, a connoisseur, who always had trouble relating to Premchand's at times acerbic prose, to his dry insight into the frailty of social and familial relations, be it between woman and man, between parent and child, or with neighbors and community, Raja Bhaiya was well versed in the period Premchand and his famous contemporary Jayshankar Prasad lived and worked in, and he kept me from making many a slip, often making me revise hasty judgments made on the basis of what was, after all, fictional reality, literary reality.

I needed to understand another cityscape, to go beyond the havelis, garden retreats, and the riverside panorama of the temples and mansions built by the wealthy and the powerful, to those parts of the town foreseen for the less affluent – the emerging middle class. By this time, Raja Bhaiya had moved from his campus abode to his house in Nagwa, and I had started staying in the hotels lining Assī Ghāṭ. Now I was roaming the inner lanes of Banāras, either on my own or with Madhuri Desai, who was writing her dissertation on the architectural history of Banāras.

The author with Ray Anand Krishna

For all his vivacity and irreverence, Harishchandra had circumvented 'tradition' even while questioning it. But Premchand occupied another social and political location, and he lived in another time. *Sevāsadan* (1918) and *Karmabhūmi* (1932), Premchand's two Banāras novels, by taking venerable institutions head on, literally stormed the citadel that was the holy city of Kāśī. By the early decades of the twentieth century, the choice of a bridegroom for a high caste girl was more than ever fixated on matching caste status and on dowry. More than ever, women were on sale. *Sevāsadan* questioned the very foundation of modern upper-caste marriage. The narrative skillfully counter-posed to the rigid world of caste-regulated unions the relative freedom a successful *tawa'if*, courtesan, enjoyed; she had money, social power, and some control of her life. As Suman, the young Brahman girl at the centre of the novel, observed bitterly, the only difference between her situation and that of the *tawa'if*, consisted in her being confined to a single client – the elderly, poverty-stricken husband who had 'bought' her by virtue of the power endowed him by his caste and gender.

I looked for Benia Bagh, the colonial park which then had its zoo and aviary, its stone benches, reserved for the elite, and shaded avenues, I wandered down Dalmandi, a narrow street, located in the heart of the city, to get some sense of what had once been the courtesan quarters. I went in the early morning, before the shops opened and the place filled with clamour, to look for other sights and other sounds, echoes from another past: graceful *jharokhā*s set in tall, slender buildings, from which poured music and the sound of dancing anklets in the evening and dandies on horse-back paraded the stone paved street. Premchand's vivid descriptions re-

corded that past, with more fascination than disapproval. Perhaps he had embarked on *Sevāsadan*, with an indictment of marriage as market transaction in mind, but he ended up by portraying, with great empathy, both the world of the courtesan, the many talented, beautiful, and sometimes strong women embedded in it, and the wretched universe of latter day marital unions, where neither man nor woman found mental stability or satisfaction; the narrative had not a single couple it could prop up as possible model of a happy union. At the centre of the novel were set scenes in the increasingly communalized municipality of the city, where the 'Hindu' council members portrayed courtesans as representatives of Muslim depravity, looking to remove them from the heart of town, backed by bull-headed social reformists, who looked neither left or right, as they set out to accomplish their goals.

To rescue the 'Hindu' woman from the life of the bazaar, Premchand showed, could only lead to her confinement in puritanical reform institutions which could neither erase the stigma of her former life, nor find a way to deal with her social isolation, her only fault having been that she had looked for a measure of power and happiness, however ephemeral its duration. This was a radical feminist stance, far ahead of its times.

When I visited Banāras now – we are speaking of the first decade of the twenty-first century – I stayed in 'Ganges View', the riverside hotel on Assī Ghāṭ run with such fine aesthetic sense and such personal warmth and care by its proprietor and director, Shashank Singh. Scholars and artists met here in search of one kind of Banāras or another, and one could house in the rooms on its topmost storey, observe the river, and write in peace. Rakeshji of 'Harmony', which I have come to regard as one of the best bookstores in the country, also created meeting grounds, not only with the latest publications, art books, translations, and scholarly studies, but also with the particular set of scholars visiting the city at a given time. I was writing on *Karmabhūmi* at this time, Premchand's second last novel set in the early 1930s, and once again, I had luck. Shashankji's father had grown up in these decades, his old books on the city and its culture were strewn in the hotel.

Karmabhūmi is worlds removed from *Sevāsadan*. An educated middle class has come into being, providing resistance, however subdued at times, though always simmering under the surface and ready to burst into boisterous street protest, to colonial rule. Professors, lawyers, judges, even the Indian members of the Civil Service and the police force, are succumbing to the strong nationalist wave. It is a world almost entirely coloured by Gandhian principles. The Mahatma's famous salt *satyāgraha* has just taken place, and he has concluded his epic fast to counter the move to establish a separate electorate for Dalits. Though he is not mentioned once in the novel, censorship laws were draconian and a nervous colonial government proscribed readily, his presence is all pervasive, whether in non-violent peasant protest and village uplift work, or in the cause of Dalit temple entry. The novel's whole tenor, however, its support for the working poor of the city, its projection of women as leaders of political protest and beyond their public role, into their rights in the private sphere, goes further than Gandhi.

Yet more radical are the insights the novel provides into lives closely interwoven and shaped by politics. There is a new interiority, a new sense of seeking comradeship in marriage; women are going to college, reading novels, and projecting companionship rather than servitude as the goal of marital union. But once again, it is the frailty of these relationships rather than any belief in the inherent stability of marriage as an institution that seems to preoccupy the characters in the novel.

The utopian cast of the novel, however, allows for the storming of many citadels. Under Gandhian leadership and the support of youthful activists, Dalits manage to enter a key temple of the city. The civil servants are moved to concede that some negotiation be made with the starving peasants about unfairly leveled revenue dues, and the municipality gives in on a major land scam so that the poor get housing within the city. These are fictional moves, in no way reflecting the reality of city politics, but they do take place, marking the long way the city has come since the first stirrings of social reform in the teens of the century.

In looking back on my work in Banāras, it becomes clear to me how far I myself have come from my childhood impressions of the holy city. In my early Banāras-based work, I recognize the seeds of my own rebellion against what had come to mean 'tradition' for me. Though the image of the 'classic' city has never quite gone away, the accretions of the many layers which went into the construction even of that, have become clearer to me and I have better understood what went into the making of my world. However, despite all that the city evokes in me, despite all remembrance of things past, I have remained an outsider, eager to understand, though not always able to do so. This combination, of being an insider as well as an outsider, of understanding and not understanding, has taken me back to the city again and again.

I am now moving to a Religious Studies Department on the East Coast of the United States. As if in anticipation of this move, in the last years I have begun work on the major theosophical reformulation of modern Hinduism in the early twentieth century, a process set in motion in Banāras, in the beautiful campus of the Theosophical Society in the city, now in a state of picturesque decay. Of particular interest to me is the key role played by another Vaiṣṇava merchant of Banāras in this venture. Clearly, there is more than sufficient work in the city to keep me occupied for the rest of my life.

Guides to Śiva's Beloveds: Teachers, friends, and helpers at the sacred threshold of Banāras

Hillary Rodrigues

For Omji

Preamble

The intents behind this paper are at least three-fold, although these are closely intertwined. First, as per the themes of the conference where this paper was presented, I wish to provide an homage to the city of Banāras. I do so through references to an assortment of significant individuals – all with some connection to the city – who have guided me in crucial ways in my scholarly and personal life. My second intent is methodological. Here, in part, I wish to illustrate the benefits of using mostly narrative in my presentation, rather than offering a typical scholarly paper (e.g., research findings and arguments in their support) on some feature of Banāras. My rationale for this approach is that narrative is a proven method as an effective form for evoking the substance of experience, as well as capturing facets of human character. And my third objective is pedagogical. In this regard, I hope to inform the reader about some of the charms of Banāras, about some of my published research and related works by others (this is mostly relegated to footnotes), about rationales for and variations in methodology in scholarly discourse (illustrated by the style of my paper), and most importantly, to draw further attention to the people whom I discuss.

Introduction

My first memory of Banāras is of being simultaneously delighted and disconcerted as I tried to make my way through a warren of narrow alleys in search of my hotel. I saw smiling and beckoning merchants – their lips and teeth stained red from chewing *paan*, the ubiquitous betel nut quid I would eventually grow to love. They were selling incense, coloured powders, brass utensils and flower garlands for worship rituals, and a host of other paraphernalia. Occasionally, a mangy dog skittered past my ankles, and I had to avoid the horns of a cow ambling down the cramped lanes, or try skilfully to dodge stepping too deeply into splatters of dung that it had left behind. The year was 1978, and I was in Viśvanātha Galī, the alley just off the broad avenue leading to Daśāśvamedha Ghāṭ, a renowned locale on the banks of the Gaṅgā. At the time I had been travelling in Asia for almost a year, and was seeking directions to the Yogi Lodge, a veritable pilgrimage destination for low-budget travellers like myself. The Yogi Lodge had a choice central location because it was a stone's throw

from the Gaṅgā, and its upper terrace overlooked the most venerated temple to Śiva in all of Banāras, Kāśī Viśvanātha, whose soaring spire gleamed with the over 800 kilograms of gold that encrusted its surface.

Quite honestly, I did not know much about Śiva or anything about Kāśī Viśvanātha at the time, and was simply looking for a budget residence. I probably looked a bit like one of Śiva's frightening cohorts or *gaṇa*s, with my long beard and hair that was getting matted. In the spirit of Śiva's *gaṇa*s, I did spend almost all of my first night at the Maṇikarṇikā cremation ground, riveted in fascination as bodies arrived with surprising regularity, and were transformed into cinders on the fires before my eyes. In the hours past midnight, with my hair and clothes dusted with ash, and my nostrils full of the smell of the smoke from the charnel pyres, as dogs fought over a piece of bone, I saw a pregnant cow give birth to a calf a few metres away from where I sat. A crescent moon's light illuminated the scene, and dimly reflected off the Gaṅgā, whose flowing waters seemed to witness and testify to the endless cycle of death and life so dramatically juxtaposed and framed for me in that vignette. Perhaps it was at that moment that Banāras left its first deep imprint on my psyche, but I did not know then that I would return repeatedly to this riverbank in the decades that followed. Now it is true that the temple of Kāśī Viśvanātha, the river Gaṅgā, and the cremation grounds are all regarded as beloved by Śiva. However, my paper will focus on two other things beloved to that unconventional, matted-haired, ash-smeared great god, namely, spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*) and the Goddess (Devī). More importantly, it will touch upon some of the extraordinary people who have guided me in my understanding of these. Most of these people have some connection with Banāras, which is itself regarded as a city particularly beloved to Śiva. To introduce them properly, I must continue with my narrative.

Guides to Śiva's beloveds

The next day, I found myself walking in the baking hot afternoon in the direction of Banaras Hindu University (BHU). It was then that I first came upon an impressive looking maroon-red temple, whose shape reflected into the waters of a square tank beside it. I found it essentially deserted in the mid-afternoon heat, and was pointed by a boy who watched after one's shoes, to the upper terrace of the quadrangle that surrounded the structure. A horde of mischievous monkeys scampered around, and since their attitude, their droppings, and the scorching floor were too off-putting to me and my bare feet, I hurriedly left the site, and made my way to the cool waters of the Gaṅgā near Assī Ghāṭ. The young men who ran the Yogi Lodge later told me that I had seen 'the monkey temple.' I had no idea at the time that this temple was dedicated to the goddess Durgā, who would become a focal point for studies that would occupy me for most of my scholarly career. Of course, I did not know then that I would even have a scholarly career.

I had come to Banāras during the course of my Asian travels because it was known as an important religious centre for Hindus who bathed in the Ganges river at dawn. However, I had timed my arrival because I had heard that the Indian born

religious teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti was supposed to be giving talks somewhere in the city at that time. Thus Krishnamurti was indirectly one of my first guides to the sacred city of Banāras. I had read a few books by Krishnamurti while at university, and resonated with his message that one should learn about life through experience, and not blindly follow spiritual teachers, including him, or their teachings, including his own.[1] He pointed to the need for a radical psychological transformation through a profound realization about the deluding nature of thought. I was totally hooked on the notion of such a realization, be it *nirvāṇa*, *mokṣa*, spiritual liberation, or psychological transformation, but did not really know what exactly it meant, or how to go about attaining it. My *saṃsāric* wanderings in Asia were centrally linked to this quest, but did not involve desperately seeking out gurus or ashrams to join.

I liked Krishnamurti's approach, precisely because it undercut tradition. It was for this reason that I had travelled hurriedly from Manali to Banāras, arriving in the middle of the period of the few days during which Krishnamurti's talks were supposed to have been delivered. To my dismay, a gentleman at the local chapter of the Theosophical Society informed me that Krishnamurti had fallen ill and decided to cancel the last days' discourses. In essence, I had missed him. 'But if you go up to Rājghāṭ, early tomorrow morning,' the Theosophist said, as if to assuage my disappointment, 'you might be able to see him getting into the car as he leaves.' I shook my head in disbelief as I thanked him for his help. I was trying simultaneously to digest the disappointment of having missed the talks, and processing the psychological and emotional effect of the helpful Theosophist's suggestion. He was suggesting how I could get a glimpse of Krishnamurti, almost as if one might take *darśana* of a deity or a saintly figure. And was this why I had actually wanted to see Krishnamurti? Would hearing his words and seeing him in the flesh have been markedly different from reading his teachings in a book – especially given the nature of his message, which was to not be preoccupied with religious teachers and their teachings? I quickly found myself delightfully freed from the disappointment. As scholars we might reasonably argue whether or not Krishnamurti's notion of radical psychological transformation is identical with Patanjali's idea of *kaivalya*, or akin to the Buddhist notion of *nirvāṇa,* and so on. However, they are all regarded as spiritual liberation, whatever its true nature might be, and spiritual liberation is deeply beloved to Śiva in his persona as the *mahāyogin*, *par excellence.*

So my first encounter with Banāras had actually connected me to the goddess Durgā and to Krishnamurti, two major focal points of my subsequent scholarly work, even though I had not the faintest inkling at the time that I would be doing any schol-

1 Some months earlier, while staying in Madras (now Chennai) at the Theosophical Society Headquarters, I learned a bit about Krishnamurti's life with the Theosophists, who had found him as a teenager and groomed him to be an influential spiritual teacher. To their surprise and dismay, after a pivotal spiritual awakening, Krishnamurti had left the organization that was founded on his behalf, and disbanded his followers, but continued teaching about self-reliance in the quest for transformative realization. On Krishnamurti's life see Lutyens 1975, 1983 and 1988.

arly work in religion, much less on goddesses or on notions of liberation.[2] In fact, the encounters were ephemeral, even negative, for I missed Krishnamurti's talks, and had a lack-lustre experience at the Durgā temple.

The theme of the conference at which the original version of this paper was delivered was 'Banāras Revisited: Scholarly Pilgrimages to the City of Light.' Our papers and the conference itself played upon the term 'revisited,' for we were intellectually revisiting a city that had a marked influence upon most of the participants who had at least once visited it. And yet I purposely chose to begin with my first visit there, in order to play further with the notion of repeated visits, both physical and intellectual. As for 'pilgrimage,' it most certainly is pregnant with meanings for pilgrims and religious studies scholars. There are, of course, many uses of the term. In common parlance, one might make a yearly pilgrimage to the doctor for a medical checkup, or to visit family members over the holidays. More obviously, we use the term in its religious context for such obvious endeavors as undertaking the Hajj, or the Way of Santiago de Compostela, or the journey to Pandharpur, to Kataragama, or circumambulating Banāras through the Pañcakrośī pilgrimage. In the context of that conference, the usage was again playful, drawing more upon a secular sort of intent, for scholars, especially those who study religion, are most certainly expected to keep arms-length from admission of fully (i.e., religiously) participating in any type of religious activity. So, we certainly were not supposed to have been on real (i.e., religious) pilgrimages to Banāras, the City of Light. They were 'scholarly pilgrimages,' for reasons such as study, or to conduct research.

Here, too, I opted to take certain liberties with the title of the conference's theme, although I do not think I strayed far beyond its parameters, if at all. My decision was informed to a degree by theorists such as J. Z. Smith and Catherine Bell, who have suggested that categories such as 'religion,' or 'ritual,' and by extension, 'pilgrimage,' are scholarly constructions in the first place.[3] We construct labels which we then attempt to apply in order to categorize human activity and experience. Pilgrimage, then, is first and foremost an intellectual category constructed by us to circumscribe certain human behaviors. My first visit to Banāras was in many ways a classic religious pilgrimage. Without knowing it or labelling it as such, in my deeply personal and all-encompassing quest, I had actually journeyed from the Himalayas, along the path of the Gaṅgā, to Banāras, to meet with a spiritual teacher who might help point me to my goal. Without knowing it, I had also embarked upon the first phase of my scholarly pilgrimages to Banāras, for both Krishnamurti and the Durgā temple would become foci of subsequent research. The choice of my paper's title also

2 My earlier works on Krishnamurti include Rodrigues 1997 and 2001.

3 See, for instance, Smith (1988: 233), who argues that scholars construct the category of 'religion' as an object of study, much as we construct the discipline of 'religious studies.' In a similar vein, Catherine Bell (2009) points out how 'ritual' is a category also constructed by scholars as part of the modernist enterprise. I am sympathetic to Donald Wiebe's (1991) critique of Smith, when he suggests that Smith may almost be erroneously implying that scholars somehow construct the phenomenon of religion in the process.

plays upon the Hindu tradition of *paṇḍa*s, the ubiquitous pilgrimage priest-guides, who are so crucial to the character of Banārasī life.

Almost 12 years later, in 1990, when I arrived in Banāras to conduct my doctoral fieldwork, my attitude to the city was quite different from when I had previously travelled there. In 1978, I was more centrally concerned with finding myself, similarly I suppose to what Mari Korpela (2010) has found among the attitudes of some long-term Western residents of Banāras. By 1990, Banāras had changed. Originally, one of its most memorable sounds was the tinkling of the bells of its many bicycles and cycle rickshaws. But these had diminished and yielded to the beeps of scooters and motorcycles. Ironically, despite these changes, I had almost the same grim experience at the Durgā temple on a hot afternoon on the first day of my scholarly fieldwork in 1990 as I had 12 years earlier. The temple looked absolutely devoid of life and activity, except for the bands of monkeys on the rooftop, and I began to despair about why I had chosen that site as the base of my participant-observation studies on the goddess Durgā for the entire year ahead. The memories of my first visit 12 years earlier now rushed back with greater vividness, and I wished that I had more clearly remembered how unappealing that experience had been.

After spending a few hours admiring the architecture of the temple, which still did not show much activity, I made my way over to the home of Om Prakash Sharma, who lived just across the street. Sharmaji, or Omji, as he was known to virtually all the scholars who have ever visited Banāras, was one of the city's many extraordinary citizens. Omji, who was from Himachal Pradesh, was originally employed by Professor Jonathan Parry of the London School of Economics, to serve as a research assistant for Parry's work in Kangra. Omji later relocated to Banāras to work with Parry on the Aghorī sect. Omji walked the banks of the Gaṅgā, meeting people, setting up interviews, assisting in translations, and so on, and in the process became a research assistant extraordinaire.[4] A few weeks after the conference at which a version of this paper was delivered, I received news from Professor Rana Singh that Omji had passed away. I felt saddened by the news, but heartened to realize that I had spoken about him in my presentation at Trondheim. Just days before his death, I had also chatted fondly about him while in Portugal with the scholars Mariana Caixero and Fernando Cardoso, both of whom knew Omji and his family. I dedicate this paper to his memory.

4 Parry's work includes *Caste and Kinship in Kangra* (1979) and *Death in Banaras* (1994).

Dr. Om Prakash Sharma (Om-ji), co-ordinator of Karlstad University's Centre for Indian Studies, pictured with the author's daughters at Gaṅgā Mahal, the study centre's mansion overlooking the river Gaṅgā at Assī Ghāṭ.

Omji had assisted my thesis supervisor, Professor David Kinsley, in his work on Hindu goddesses. Kinsley loved Banāras and conducted much of the fieldwork for his studies there.[5] I must certainly include Professor Kinsley (or David, as he preferred to be called) as one of my many guides to Śiva's beloved city. Beyond being a major contributor to the movement that spearheaded the study of Hindu goddesses by western scholars, Professor Kinsley was a gifted teacher. His scholarly writing was lucid and engaging, and he also took time to produce materials that would benefit undergraduates.[6] Kinsley was celebrated by a number of scholars who were inspired by his work. In an anthology edited by Rachel McDermott and Jeffrey Kripal (2003) he was designated as 'the father of Kālī studies.' A festschrift edited by Professor Rana P.B. Singh (2010) includes articles contributed by myself, Xenia Zeiler and Annette Wilke. Kinsley played a pivotal role in inspiring my own efforts to produce pedagogically useful materials for novice students – something that has been oc-

5 For instance, see Kinsley 1986.
6 See, for instance, Kinsley 1982.

cupying perhaps a bit too much of my time of late. Such work is often a labour of love or necessity, because it can be enormously time-consuming, and does not typically receive the recognition from peers and administrative heads that it deserves. And yet, without decent introductory books for budding students, and materials that might inspire them to take up the study of religious traditions more seriously, we risk undercutting the successful development of our disciplines.[7]

At the time of my first meeting with Omji, I was unaware that he was actually a devout Śākta, and thus an invaluable aid in my work. Although he assisted a number of scholars simultaneously, such as my colleague, Christopher Justice, who was then studying death hospices in the city (Justice 1997), Omji always found a way to make time for me, and help me with my research. On that first encounter, when I expressed my concern about the lack of activity at the Durgā temple, he reassured me that I only needed to be patient. To assuage my thirst for witnessing some dramatic religious rituals, he soon sent me off to witness a rite in which an icon of Lāṭ Bhairava is carried in procession at midnight to the Kapālamocana Kuṇḍ, to consummate his marriage with the goddess who abides there. And so, within days of my arrival in Banāras, I found myself wandering with swarms of raucous devotees down alleys in the middle of the night. This would be a far more common occurrence in the months that followed, but on that first occasion, it was quite unsettling. I had no real idea where I was (this was not a ritual I had previously researched), and found myself following a large metal head carried on a palanquin, which stopped dozens of times, at which points a bare-chested priest conducted theatrical *pūjā*s with blazing fire and alcohol offerings, and showers of red powder flung onto the crowd. That night's experience was enough to quell my anxiety and yearning for dramatic rituals. I had very little idea about what was going on, but I was left with a thousand questions. Who was Lāṭ Bhairava in relationship to Śiva? Why was he marrying the pond of water where, in myth, Śiva supposedly dropped the severed head of Brahmā that had been attached to his hand? And why were there no foreigners around witnessing this amazing ritual? I soon discovered that my own research would entail plenty of lonely, painstaking work in the months and years ahead.[8]

I do not mean to make myself out to be more naïve than I actually was. In fact, I was much more familiar with India than most young scholars who arrive there to conduct fieldwork for the first time in their lives. After all, I was born in India, and had lived in parts of Maharashtra and Gujarat until the age of eleven. And a little over a decade before my doctoral fieldwork sojourn, I had spent about a year and a half in South Asia of my three years of wandering around in search of *mokṣa*. Moreover, I had read a lot in the intervening years. However, it is one thing to have read

7 Pedagogically oriented works that I have produced include *Introducing Hinduism* (2006), *Hinduism – the eBook* (2006), and *Introduction to the Study of Religion* (2009), the latter co-authored with John Harding. I have also co-authored with Tom Robinson *World Religions: A Guide to the Essentials* (2005), and the eBook, *World Religions Reader: Selected Texts and Symbols* (2010).

8 An excellent study of this ritual is found in Visuvalingam and Chalier-Visuvalingam 2006.

D. C. Sircar's *The Śākta Pīthas* (1948), or Diana Eck's *Banāras* (1982), and thereby to know intellectually that mountains and ponds may be worshipped as *liṅga*s and *yoni*s, and quite another thing to see the modes of those beliefs and forms of worship actually in practice. I quickly began to rethink what the Durgā Kuṇḍ, the sacred tank beside the Durgā temple, actually was, beyond simply being a place for devotees to cool off and bathe before entering the temple. I also began to look more closely whether or not there still were or had been wells, caves, springs, or ponds at the sites of other goddess temples, whose natural geographic features might have changed through urban developments, and I still constantly look for the juxtaposition of *liṅga/yoni* symbolic features in tantrically oriented religious sites.[9]

Omji was always aware of the many festival activities that took place virtually daily throughout the city, and through his guidance, I came to have a much richer understanding of the religious life in and around Śiva's city than if I had just focussed on Durgā and her temple. I have some vivid memories of some of our field trips together, such as a journey of over a hundred kilometers sharing the driver's seat in an auto-rickshaw. We went first to the fortress at Chunar, the city where much of Banāras' temple stone is quarried. We continued our journey beyond Chunar to Vindhyachal, the site of the renowned temple to the goddess Vindhyavāsinī. Dr. Marc Katz, a fellow participant in the Trondheim conference, could certainly share innumerable tales about his involvement with Omji in Karlstad University's Swedish Study Centre for Indian Culture Program. Omji was a veritable *paṇḍa par excellence* for generations of 'scholar pilgrims' to the City of Light.

It was not long before I found that the daily, weekly, monthly and annual cycles at the Durgā Kuṇḍ temple, or Durgājī, as it, or she, is known to most Banārasīs, ebbed and flowed like the seasons. There was much more to the activities at the temple than I had originally thought. The temple came to life during morning and evening *āratis*, the collective rites of adoration, and more so on Tuesdays and Saturdays, when devotees sought the Devī's protection from the pernicious influences of the inauspicious planets Maṅgala and Śani, respectively. And tens of thousands of votaries visited the temple during the spring and autumn Navarātras, in the months of Caitra and Aśvina.[10] Another great celebration at Durgājī was the *śṛṅgāra*, loosely referred to as the birthday of the goddess and the annual temple cleaning and decoration festival. Although the festival at the Hanumān temple of Sankat Mochan is more renowned, for three days the Durgā temple also stages music and dance celebrations that run almost through the entire night. To my surprise, these performances were staged for the Goddess, with the human audience being of secondary concern to the temple organizers.

It was at the Durgājī *śṛṅgāra*, that I first encountered a longhaired and bearded

9 For instance, sites outside of India that vividly demonstrate these features of sexual symbolic polarity, and which have been sacralised precisely because of it, include Vat Phou on Lingaparvata mountain in southern Laos, Kbal Spean in the Kulen Hills of Cambodia, and Huong Tich cave in Vietnam.

10 Studies I have published on the worship of Durgā in Banāras and the Durgā Kuṇḍ temple include Rodrigues 1993 and 2010.

Westerner, who showed up to watch some of the musical performances. He looked very much at home in Banāras; he certainly seemed at home with the city's temple and music culture, as he pressed his way to the front of the audience, sat in a choice position, and then kept time to the *tāla* of the *rāga*s, with which he seemed quite familiar.[11] It turns out that this Western music aficionado was none other than Dr. Mark Dyczkowski, who was himself an accomplished sitar player, and was then just beginning to gain international recognition through his early publications on Kashmir Śaivism.[12] Dr. Dyczkowski possessed the generosity of spirit that is so characteristic of the residents of Banāras. He was happy to share his knowledge with anyone who was interested, and organized scholarly talks where established visiting scholars or junior researchers could share their findings with each other. Over the decades I have had many opportunities to meet with and learn from Dr. Dyczkowski, especially as I discovered that Durgā had many more Tantric associations than I had previously imagined.[13]

My access to the Durgā temple was greatly facilitated by Parasnath Dubey, the late *mahant* of Durgājī, and in particular, his youngest son, Raju, who is now, together with his four brothers, one of the major stakeholders in the ownership of the temple. I developed my taste for Banārasi *paan*, after chewing dozens of quids with Raju, and with Om Prakash Agarwal, another friend and indispensable guide to the Goddess. Om Prakash was trained as a lawyer, but practices only nominally. Instead, he runs a *bindi* and bangle souvenir store, on the premises of Durgājī, which caters mostly to female devotees who want to leave with some costume jewellery for themselves or toys for their children after a temple visit. Om Prakash always had a place for me to sit by the front of his store, and plied me regularly with cups of *chai*, and quids of *paan*, as we chatted about all and sundry. His shop's location was directly to the right of the sacrificial pit that faced the main entrance to the inner courtyard of the temple. And so from where I sat, I often had the best view of the only officially sanctioned location in all of Banāras, where blood sacrifices may be performed.[14]

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11 At the time, I knew next to nothing about Indian classical music, having only appreciated some Ravi Shankar and Alla Rakha, through videos of their performances at the Monterrey Pop and Woodstock Folk Festivals. To learn something more about Indian music, I eventually began to study bamboo flute (*bansuri*) with one of Vārāṇasī's then young shehnai teachers, Sohan Lal (aka Chandra Kant Prasad) and thus began to enhance my appreciation for the rich musical and dance traditions in the city.

12 Mark Dyczkowski's works at that time included: *The Doctrine of Vibration* (1987), and *The Canon of the Śaivāgama and the Kubjikā Tantras of the Western Tradition* (1987). He was in the process of publishing *The Stanzas on Vibration* (1992), and *The Aphorisms of Śiva* (1992).

13 Dyczkowski has since produced other outstanding works, most notably his editing, translating, and annotation of *Manthanabhairavatantram: Kumārikākhaṇḍaḥ: the section concerning the virgin goddess of the Tantra of the churning Bhairava* (2009), in six volumes, three of which contain the Introduction.

14 Over the years I discovered that Om Prakash Agarwal was not just a businessman, but a devout Śākta, who attributed much of his success to the beneficence bestowed upon him by the Devī. In a reversal from what I had originally assumed, about the relationship between women and goddesses, as opposed to men, his wife was sceptical of excessive interest in

I have taken time to talk about persons such as Om Prakash Agarwal, Om Prakash Sharma, Parasnath Dubey and his son Raju because they exemplify a benevolence of spirit and a capacity to teach and share that does not only belong to certified teachers and scholars. In this vein, another remarkable figure in my development was Mr. Manindra Mohan Lahiri. Mr. Lahiri was a Bengali zamindar, who lost much of his landholdings after Bangladesh separated from India. He and his family retired to Banāras, and live in the Bengalī Ṭolā district of the city, where they host one of the few remaining domestic celebrations of the Durgā Pūjā. By this, I mean an elaborate style of Durgā Pūjā, with a full polychromed unbaked clay *pratimā*, the tableau that depicts Durgā and her great lion slaying the buffalo demon Mahiṣa, which will be worshipped over three days during the autumn Navarātra, in the style that is mostly seen in communal public venues throughout the city.[15] It was not long before Mr. Lahiri discovered that I was deeply invested in the study of the Devī, and the entire family began to assist me in every imaginable way. I thus had the opportunity to witness first hand and up close every feature of the Durgā Pūjā rite, from the *bodhana* and *adhivāsa* (the awakening and anointing) rites prior to the first day, to the *visarjana* (immersion) rituals on the final day.

Despite having previously read various books on the ritual, such as the studies by Ghosha (1871) and Östör (1980), I was still overwhelmed by what I saw. I became intrigued by the actions of Pandit Nitai Bhattacharya, the Lahiri family's extraordinary ritualist, who performed *mūdras*, recited prayers, moved around the image, anointing it, dressing it, propitiating it, and so on with a dazzling array of offering materials from incenses, waters, oils, flames, and foods. And he did so with extraordinary grace and dexterity, reading from a text at times, or reciting from memory. What was he saying? What was he doing to himself and the images with his fingers and with those gestures? What was he drawing on the floor? What did those implements and items symbolize? Since he mostly spoke Bengali, I was eventually directed to Pandit Hemendra Nath Chakravarty, by whom I am graced to have been mentored.

Pandit Chakravarty was a student of the renowned Tantric scholar Gopinath Kaviraj, and served as the main *paṇḍita* for the research branch of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) in Vārāṇasī. An expert in Kashmir Śaivism, particularly the *pratyabhijña* system, he assisted numerous scholars in their studies of Tantric and Puranic texts, including David Kinsley, Patricia Dold, and David Peter Lawrence.[16] My own work with Pandit Chakravarty was different in nature, because I sought him out for the study of the ritual worship of the Devī, during the Bengali-styled Durgā Pūjā. As well as being a scholar, Pandit Chakravarty had performed the ritual (either as the

religion in general, and didn't think much of the time and energy Om Prakash gave to his regular rites of worship through the course of a year. Om Prakash was always enthusiastic to show me sites of interest, or to discover them together, and we spent much time over the last decades on his motorcycles careening through narrow alleys in the city to some small temple or some potentially helpful informant's home.

15 See Ghosha 1871 and Östör 1980.

16 See for instance, Kinsley 1997, Dold 2009, and Lawrence 2008.

main ritualist or as the *tantradhāraka*, the assistant) dozens of times, and was able to share with me the nuts and bolts of actions in the celebration of that elaborate *pūjā*, as well as offer insider interpretations of the meanings of particular activities in the ritual process. It took several meetings per week for about half a year, and daily meetings for weeks at a time over the course of a decade, before the liturgical details of the *pūjā* were sufficiently uncovered, and the litany collated and translated.[17] Within that litany, the Goddess is often addressed with the refrain, *'Śaṅkara prīye,'* 'the beloved of Śaṅkara (Śiva),' and this phrase was the inspiration for the title of my paper.

While my studies with Pandit Chakravarty and with the Lahiri family taught me much about Bengali Hinduism in Vārāṇasī, with its intriguing blend of Tantrism and Vedic orthodoxy, my studies with Pandit Bhagiratha Tripathi (aka Vagish Shastri), offered me insights into the life of a more traditionally (i.e., Vedically-oriented) orthodox *brāhmaṇa*. Pandit Tripathi, or simply Guruji as his western students called him, offered a system of learning Sanskrit that he entitled Vāg-yoga, the Yoga of Speech, which was strongly centered on the sound of the language.[18] Since I was primarily engaged in an anthropologically oriented research on the goddess Durgā, my Sanskrit studies with Guruji that year were mostly an excuse to avail myself of his company and knowledge about aspects of Hinduism. I never ceased to be amazed by the breadth of his knowledge, and his enviable easy access to the content of Sanskrit texts.

However, I had an eye-opening experience early one morning when I arrived at his home in Śivālā, and saw his wife and several other women engaged in an elaborate rite in the courtyard. There was a huge assortment of fruits and other offerings, kitchen utensils, and the like, incense, lamps, and coloured powders. When I went up to see Guruji, I respectfully touched his feet, sat on the cushion on the floor of his library, and asked. 'What is Mātājī doing down there?' 'Oh, some women's ritual,' he replied, and was unable to tell me much more about what was evidently some sort of a *vrata* that his wife was performing. This was evidently part of a women's ritual tradition passed down from mothers to daughters and mostly unfamiliar to even an erudite *paṇḍita* schooled in the textual tradition. I was poignantly reminded – and this realization has been subsequently confirmed on numerous occasions – how the complexities of practices within Hinduism do not simply extend to different sects or regions of South Asia, but may be evident even within the same household. It is through such experiences, in which the complexities of practice can open us to learn about the nature of a religious tradition, as well as because of my interests in

17 This work is written up in Rodrigues 2003. Another related piece is Rodrigues 2005.

18 I wrote a vignette about my first encounter with him in *Introducing Hinduism*, and *Hinduism – the eBook*, my introductory textbooks on the Hindu tradition. I met him on his terrace catching the cool breezes of the evening, and introduced myself and asked if he would be willing to teach me Sanskrit. 'Have you studied any Sanskrit?' he asked. While I began to respond that I had studied it for several years, he interrupted by asking me a question in Sanskrit. I was puzzled and taken aback, because although I knew he was speaking to me in Sanskrit, I had never taken an oral approach to the language, and didn't know what he was saying. 'You don't know Sanskrit,' he said bluntly. 'We shall start at the beginning.'

pedagogy, that I successfully pitched to Routledge the notion of a series of textbooks entitled *Studying Religions in Practice*, which I currently edit.[19]

Routes of my ongoing scholarly pilgrimages

There are three main threads to my work these days. One thread is the pedagogic one, which developed through the influences of David Kinsley and the many teacher guides that have touched me through these decades. In this area, my work includes the aforementioned textbooks such as *Introducing Hinduism* and *Studying Hinduism in Practice*, although I have also recently co-written a primer on theory and method in Religious Studies, and have completed a Reader with my colleague, John Harding. A second thread is my work on undefined seekers of the enlightenment experience, which develops out of work on Krishnamurti's teachings. I recently published a paper in *Pacific World* (Rodrigues 2007), and have a book chapter on Theosophical Buddhism and how it played out on Krishnamurti's childhood in a recent publication entitled *Little Buddhas* (Rodrigues 2012). And the third main thread is my ongoing work on the goddess Durgā. I recently published a paper tracing the tantric history of the Bengali styled Durgā Pūjā (Rodrigues 2009), and am still completing my large study of Durgā in South Asia. I have already begun field research on the cult of Durgā in Southeast Asia, notably examining vestigial traces in Cambodia and Vietnam, along with living traces in Indonesia.

Length does not permit me to mention the dozens of other Banārasī friends and mentors who could quite easily have been included in this paper. Nor has it allowed me to convey more than a fraction of what I would like to have said about each of those whom I have mentioned. Despite the wide variations in their livelihoods, lifestyles, and personalities, there was a certain something that they all seemed to share. This was an attitude to life which is an admixture of humor, carefreeness, surrender, and a sort of intoxication with the flavours, or *rasa,* of existence. Perhaps this is why some people make a Hindi pun about the name Banāras as meaning 'making *rasa*' (*bana rasa*), where *rasa* may be construed as anything from consciousness-altering substances, to the crucial essence of all things, especially those at the heart of aesthetic and spiritual experience. Nita Kumar descriptively evokes this Banārasī attitude of carefree intoxication (*masti*) so well in her *Artisans of Banāras*.[20] There

19 Initially, Routledge would have liked something to rival the excellent Princeton series *Religions in Practice*. However, even a cursory examination of that series reveals that the contributions therein are mostly not about actual practices, but deal with texts that talk about practice. The first two volumes in the *Studying Religions in Practice* series have already been released. These are *Studying Hinduism in Practice* (Routledge, 2011), edited by me, and *Studying Buddhism in Practice* (Routledge, 2012), edited by John Harding. Unlike the Princeton series, these are written by experienced scholars especially for novice undergraduates just beginning their studies in religious traditions, and focus on religion and the study of religion as it is actually practiced. Each contribution begins with a personal narrative written by a scholar describing their raw experience when engaged in studying some feature of religious practice, and then segues into a discussion of some feature related to the narrative.

20 See Kumar 1988. Her narrative of her initial fieldwork experience is found in Kumar 1992.

is a saying that no *sannyāsin* will ever go hungry in Banāras. One could reasonably extend that by saying no one hungry to learn more about religion will go unsatisfied in Śiva's city. Although the branches of my current projects do not directly focus on Banāras, that remarkable city was the trunk from which these branches sprouted, and many of the city's remarkable citizens and scholar-pilgrims have been, or continue to be sources that inform and inspire my work.

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Ethno-Indology Expanded: Researching mediatized religions in South Asia

Xenia Zeiler

Banāras is often considered to be a microcosm of religious traditions in South Asia, and this perception is partly based on observations of the city's remarkably varied and rich religious life today. On the one hand, we have a large and increasing number of studies based on empirical methods which focus on recent religious practices and developments.[1] On the other hand, as many of the flourishing recent beliefs and practices have their origin(s) several hundred years (or more) ago, most of the major textual sources on religion in the city have been translated. But it is a rather new and fruitful methodological approach to contextualize specific themes, and to combine well-grounded textual studies with comprehensive ethnological fieldwork. Such an ethno-indological approach enables us to study religious characteristics and developments by viewing them in their historical-textual as well as contemporary-practical settings. But most importantly, it facilitates the deciphering of transformation processes in the formation of religious traditions.

I first started doing ethno-indological research in Banāras some 15 years ago, in the mid-to-late 1990s. Since then I have often returned to Kāśī, attracted by the city's rich religious past and present, and its unique display of lived religion. In the course of several longer stays in and shorter visits to the city my view on details of the city's multiple realities sharpened. While researching transformation processes in religious traditions, I myself experienced transformations regarding both my academic and personal perspectives and approaches. In my ongoing 'scholarly pilgrimages' to the City of Light and with the support of Ethno-Indology, the diversity of *banārsī* religious histories and present practices revealed itself in a much more intense and multi-layered way than I had expected.

Here, I first want to present examples from two of my major ethno-indological projects. My first research explored the temple of Vīreśvara (Ātmavīreśvar in today's language use) in the center of Banāras. This temple is mentioned already in the formative text *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* from the fourteenth century and is consistently perceived as *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* (lit. 'as told in the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*'). I translated a mythological narrative on the temple and its rituals from the *Śivapurāṇa* as a starting point and then

1 Most of the contributors in this book have repeatedly published on these subjects with a focus on Banāras. See, for instance, Katz 1993, Keul 2002, Kumar 1995, Rodrigues 2011, Singh and Singh 2006, Wilke 2006, and Zeiler 2011.

conducted fieldwork, including participant observations and interviews, for several months to gather detailed information, especially on the temple's recent ritual as compared to ritual instructions in the *Śivapurāṇa*. By means of this methodical approach, I was able to separate untransformed from transformed ritual practices and to discuss questions of continuity and change of *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* ritual traditions.

My second long project to date applying ethno-indological premises and methods focused on the goddess Dhūmāvatī, and on transformations from her original, textual, Tantric-esoteric, and highly dangerous representation to her recent interpretation as a mainstream and benevolent district goddess, a *mohallā devī*. To analyze her Tantric textual tradition, I translated all the sources on Dhūmāvatī available to me, including for the first time the respective chapters on Dhūmāvatī in the *Mantramahārṇava* and *Śāktapramoda* from Sanskrit. To study the contemporary beliefs, ritual practices, and representations, I undertook extensive fieldwork in the temple of Dhūmāvatī in the *mohallā* (lit. 'district/quarter') Dhūpcaṇḍī for nearly two years. By unfolding developments and transformations starting from Dhūmāvatī's textual origin up to the lived tradition, I was also able to discuss general processes of integrating Tantric heteropraxy into Hindu orthopraxy as well as widespread 'saumyaization' (lit. 'pacifying/sweetening') and unification tendencies, which often in contemporary Hindu tradition declare minor (wild) goddesses a (mild) manifestation of Mahādevī or Durgā. Additionally, in this project I analyzed the concept of district deities and discussed their characteristics and formation.

But in addition to presenting findings and conclusions from ethno-indological research in Banāras, in this article I aim at another major objective. Concluding the article and my reflections, I shall give an outlook on an expansion or widening of the established ethno-indological approach, which I feel is essential in response to the new situations and actualities of present-day life in South Asia. It is widely visible (and more and more researched) that the influence of modern mass media on society and culture, including religious traditions, is increasingly significant – no less so in South Asia.[2] Consequently I therefore argue to include research on the mediatization of religious traditions as one important issue in the research on present-day religious contexts. As Ethno-Indology explicitly stresses the importance of studying contexts along with texts, it is only consistent to specify the contemporary context accordingly and to include the influential field of mediatization in addition to the already accepted field of practice. Today, religious beliefs, symbols, practices, etc. are (re)interpreted and (re)constructed in modern mass media – such as film (i.e. cinema, TV, VCD, etc.), the press (i.e. newspapers, magazines, yellow press, etc.), the Internet (i.e. forums, homepages, etc.), and digital games (i.e. computer games, console games, etc.) – as much as in historical texts or as in lived practices. I will also discuss how in South Asia, the renegotiated topics presented in the so-called new media are incor-

2 Studies on the influence of new media on South Asian religions include, for instance, Dwyer 2006 on film, McLain 2009 on comics, Scheifinger 2010 on the Internet, and Zeiler 2014 on digital games.

porated by many religious actors in their own belief and religious practice. As such, media discourses today are as important as issues and topics presented in established texts. Recent religion is thus actively reshaped by and in the modern mass media. To amplify the ethno-indological approach in a way to meet this new situation, we thus need to proceed from the study of classical texts plus contemporary context, consisting of recent practices, to the study of classical texts plus contemporary context, consisting of recent practices including mediatized practices and beliefs.

Doing it the ethno-indological way

To study the complex and diverse aspects of transformation processes in religious traditions in Banāras and elsewhere in South Asia, it is inevitable that one adopts an interdisciplinary approach. In general, the need to contextualize written sources, i.e. the need to study the anthropology of texts along with the textual sources, has been acknowledged ever since the cultural turn in the humanities. In particular and most importantly, for the study of South Asian religions this has meant acknowledging the interrelations of popular culture and religion (so-called little traditions) and sanskritized orthopraxy (so-called great traditions) and, as a logical consequence, increasingly valuing regional studies, vernacular languages, and fieldwork.[3] In my opinion, to highlight and accredit the intense diversity and complexity of South Asian religious traditions in such a way and to search for and offer new methodological approaches for their study is the most important outcome of the cultural turn in the humanities for indology and for the study of South Asian culture and religion.

Among the new approaches, Ethno-Indology offers an adequate methodology to analyze textual traditions in combination with recent religious praxis and perceptions of belief systems, including for instance the transformation of deities or of religious concepts and ideas. This approach, with its balanced emphasis on textual and historical representations, and on popular, often non-textual and contemporary representations of any chosen tradition, enables us to give detailed answers to questions of (a) enduring transformation processes in general, and (b) the role and status of textual tradition for the development of recent religious praxis and beliefs in particular. The term 'Ethno-Indology' was coined by Axel Michaels, who undertook and supported many studies in India and Nepal. Michaels (2005: 11) commented on the fruitful reciprocal influence of studying text and context:

> If, thus, Indology opens up to an intensified study of the contexts of texts, if it also accepts fieldwork as a legitimate, adequate and proper (and not just supplementary) method for an appropriate analysis of the contents, functions and productions of texts, if it tries to combine the results of the textual and contextual studies with anthropological theory, it then situates itself at the confluence of philology, anthropology, and history. It is this confluence which I call Ethno-Indology [...].

3 See Michaels 2005: 9. For a general discussion on the cultural turn and Indology, see Michaels 2004.

Because I was primarily interested in studying precisely the transformations of religious traditions, Ethno-Indology was my chosen method for all of my major projects up to the present. Another important reason to prefer this method above others was the fact that I never felt satisfied by analyzing just one side of the coin. My academic as well as my personal experience concerning Hindu and Tantric religions clearly prevented me from defining textual evidence as a major or final product of religious developments, or to see older texts disconnected from modern interpretation and lived practice. On the other hand, contemporary belief systems and their representations and practices, more so in South Asia, were never fully comprehensible to me without also intensively tracing their (textual) origin and background. In theory, this was very clear to me already as a student. However, I experienced the full impact of such an approach in practice only during my initial ethno-indological studies in Banāras.

Researching the past and present of Kāśīkhaṇḍokta traditions: the Temple of Vīreśvara

The diversity of religious traditions in Banāras and the fact that interpretations of religious priorities shifted (at times extensively) in the course of history was by no means fully apparent to me right from the beginning. Quite on the contrary: my first longer stay in the city, correlating with my first ethno-indological project in the mid-to-late 1990s could have led me to the conclusion that religious practice and ritual in the city's temples had remained remarkably stable for several centuries.

The textual basis of the temple called Ātmavīreśvar today lies in the prestigious *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* tradition. The *svayambhū* (lit. 'self-originated') liṅga, situated above Sindhiā Ghāṭ near the famous temple of Saṅkaṭādevī, is mentioned several times in purāṇic literature. The most detailed mythological versions are found in *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* 83.1–59 and 10.42–11.34 as well as in *Śivapurāṇa*, *Śatarudrasaṃhitā* 13–15. All mythological versions consistently ascribe a special merit to the liṅga – the granting of a child. According to all origin myths of Vīreśvara, the liṅga was well established in the pan-Hindu context, and devotees from all over India came to worship here, especially to obtain a son. Thus the liṅga's roots can textually be traced back at least to the (early) medieval ages. Not surprisingly, today the temple still relies heavily on this textual authorization and legitimizes its own importance by drawing on the textually sanctioned tradition. This is well known by devotees who regularly visit the temple, but also non-regular visitors are made aware of it in the temple.

As much as this high esteem of the *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* tradition and the respective textual and mythological background did not surprise me, something else did. What I did not expect with such intensity was the extraordinary stability of the ritual tradition here. The first thing I discovered in my fieldwork was that, unlike very many *banārsī* liṅga temples known to me, there was a very elaborate and complex daily evening ritual undertaken by the temple's ritual experts, the *pūjārīs*. The official daily ritual routine in the temple includes four rituals that – at least in their basic forms – are quite widespread in Banāras, namely a *pratankālin* (lit. 'revealing

or beginning time') pūjā in the morning, a *bhoga* (lit. 'feeding') pūjā at noon, a *sayankālin* (lit. 'evening time') pūjā in the evening and a *rātrikālin* (lit. 'night time) pūjā at night. Though all of these are performed in an exceptionally detailed way, the evening ritual in particular is outstanding. The temple of Vīreśvara, to the best of my knowledge, is one of only three temples in the city that daily performs an elaborate *saptarṣi āratī* (the other two being the city's most visited temples, Viśveśvara and Kedāreśvara). This special form of temple ritual is performed in a number of North Indian Śaiva temples and has its mythological base in a ritualistic offering of camphor flames to Śiva and Pārvatī on their wedding night by the mythological seven *ṛṣi*s, *saptarṣi*s. The *saptarṣi āratī* as performed in the temple of Vīreśvara is based on the purāṇic *ṣoḍaśopacāra*-pūjā (lit. 'worship with 16 steps'), and daily includes all offerings prescribed for this ritual, such as perfume, scent, clothing, flowers, food and light, and climaxes in the ritual presentation of the camphor flame.[4] This waving of flames, *āratī*, which devotees are welcome to attend, is the daily temple ritual's highlight. But it is outstanding not only in terms of elaborateness. It also serves as a direct link to the tradition based on the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*. Daily in this worship, the hymn *abhilāṣaṣṭaka*[5] or the even more detailed version of this hymn, the *vīreśvarastotra*,[6] are recited. Thus, in the *saptarṣi āratī*, the textual basis of Vīreśvara is daily directly staged and re-enacted. The ritual's mythological background as well as its importance for the temple (and beyond, for the general structure of *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* tradition)[7] would have passed me unnoticed without the approach of Ethno-Indology.

This is all the more true for a second ritual 'specialty' of the Vīreśvara temple. A particular and very elaborate ritual proceeding at the temple's largest festival, Mahāśivarātri, is performed here. And again, it is based on ritual practice as precisely described in textual tradition. The *Śivapurāṇa* gives a detailed account of how to celebrate the most important night for Śiva worship. Three long chapters, *Koṭirudrasaṃhitā* 38–40, advise the subdivision of the night into four periods. For each of the three-hour periods, individual ritual procedures are prescribed. Unlike other temples in Banāras that also extensively celebrate Mahāśivarātri (such as the temple of Viśveśvara) and include a subdivision of the night into four periods but repeat the same ritual in each division, Vīreśvara is the only temple actually performing each division with individual rituals (see Figure 1). To stick this close to the textual prescriptions of sanskritized tradition (and to even surpass the contemporarily pre-eminent Viśveśvara, which also heavily draws on the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* for legitimation in Mahāśivarātri ritual) is a clear and openly visible statement about the temple's positioning in this tradition.

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4 For a photographic sequence on the ritual, see Gutschow 2006: 21.

5 *Śivapurāṇa*, *Śatarudrasaṃhitā* 13.42–9. In the hymn the *ṛṣi* Viśvānara praises the boy Vīreśvara, who appears to him right out of the liṅga with lit. '8 verses expressing his desires'. See *Śatarudrasaṃhitā* 13.41.

6 The *vīreśvarastotra* is a supplemented version of the *abhilāṣaṣṭaka* with 17 additional verses. They contain the basic mythological story of Vīreśvara from the *Śivapurāṇa*.

7 For *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* as religious authorizations in pilgrimage practice, see Gengnagel 2005.

Water oblation (*rudrābhiṣeka*) to the liṅga Vīreśvara as part of the second ritual period of Mahāśivarātri

Ethno-indological methods enabled me to trace the background of the temple's recent ritual practices, self-legitimation, and status. Without knowing this at the beginning, my first project in Banāras led me to a temple which still has very strong textual (*kāśīkhaṇḍokta* and purāṇic) bonds that are perpetuated, deployed, and propagated by the temple itself. Probably the most important outcome of this project was that the text and context of sanskritized traditions may very well still correspond without major alterations in Banāras, and that in the case of Vīreśvara (and surely in other cases as well) effort is taken to indeed actively preserve and re-enact the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* background and to disapprove of transformations, especially concerning ritual. Essential rituals and mythologies from the textual tradition defined as *kāśīkhaṇḍokta* are still strikingly alive in the temple of Vīreśvara, with regard to both the daily and the festival procedures.

Transformations of Tantric traditions: Tantric representations and the Mohallā Devī *Dhūmāvatī*

A high proximity of text and context, as found in the case of Vīreśvara, was not to be expected right from the beginning in my second ethno-indological project. For an extensive PhD research project, I analyzed transformations of the Daśamahāvidyā

goddess Dhūmāvatī from her Tantric textual origin to present representations and rituals in Banāras. In my understanding, she not only exhibits one of the most interesting textual backgrounds among the Daśamahāvidyās but also a unique modern representation in Banāras.

For this research, I again chose to use the combination of methods from two academic disciplines that I had tried and tested before. To describe, analyze, and interpret the complex transformations of Dhūmāvatī in representations, rituals, and iconography, I first analyzed her textual tradition. Also, with the help of erudite local scholars such as Hemendranath Chakrabarti and Mark Dyczkowski, I translated all the sources on Dhūmāvatī available to me at that time, both printed and in the form of unpublished manuscripts. The most important outcome of this process was a translation with commentary of the chapter *Dhūmāvatītantra*, included in both *Mantramahārṇava* and *Śāktapramoda*, from the Sanskrit for the first time. In general, I was able to present, translate, discuss, and analyze every important textual source on the goddess and to gather information on her original Tantric representation.[8] These studies, of course, were essential to understand the recent ritual praxis and modern representation of Dhūmāvatī in her *banārsī* temple, and to unfold the developments and transformations from her textual origin up to the lived tradition.

In order to study the contemporary beliefs, ritual practices, and representations, I undertook extensive fieldwork in the temple of Dhūmāvatī in the *mohallā* Dhūpcaṇḍī for nearly two years. Using various empirical methods, such as participant observation and interviews, I collected data step by step. As the temple and the presiding goddess had never before been studied *in extenso*, I first collected basic data on virtually all major (and many minor) activities and practices in and around the temple, using primarily empirical, social research methods. I spent hours each day in the temple, attended all festivals, visited all affiliated temples, and spoke to a large number of devotees in the temple and in their homes. Altogether I conducted interviews with 246 temple visitors on their beliefs and ideas on Dhūmāvatī. Questions were asked on the textual background as well as on present rituals, worship, and the general belief system in the temple. All ritual specialists in the temple, i.e. the *pūjārīs*, and members of their families, and 23 devotees with a special connection to the goddess and her temple were repeatedly interviewed individually and at length.

My previous (and at that time ongoing) textual research and my subsequent knowledge of the Tantric textual representation of Dhūmāvatī proved beneficial for the interviews, and obviously motivated my interview partners to share their ideas and beliefs with me. I was and still am very grateful for the welcome given to me in the temple. Without the support, interest, and general acceptance from the *pūjārīs* and devotees of the Dhūpcaṇḍī temple, my fieldwork would never have been possible.

The research on the textual tradition of Dhūmāvatī disclosed a goddess firmly integrated into the Tantric belief and ritual system. From the first reference in

8 For translations, analysis and discussions see Zeiler 2011: 47–97 and 2012: 169–88.

the eleventh-century *Śāradātilakatantra* (*paṭala* 24, 10–14) onward, the goddess remains remarkably stable in her representation, ritual, iconography, and function for more than six centuries. The most important textual passage for the goddess is a *dhyānamantra* (lit. 'mantra for reflection/meditation') in the fourteenth- to the sixteenth-century *Phetkāriṇītantra*. It is still regularly incorporated into texts on the goddess up to the present and gives a clear account of her Tantric textual representation:

> She is pale and fickle, angry, of high stature and wears dirty clothes. Her hair is discolored. The widow is rough and has intermittent teeth. She sits on a cart which has a crow in the banner. Her breasts hang down. In the hand she holds a winnowing fan and her eyes look very cruel. She has unsteady hands and her hand shows the gesture of wish-fulfilling. She has a big nose, is exceedingly deceitful and has crooked eyes. Permanently afflicted by hunger and thirst she arouses horror and has her abode in conflict.[9]

This influential *dhyānamantra* strongly influences Dhūmāvatī's representation up to the present. This is especially true for her visual representation: depictions of the goddess in every modern compilation I traced, as well as most of the paintings of Dhūmāvatī known to me, depict the goddess according to this textual passage.[10] This iconographical and conceptual representation of the exceptionally dangerous and dark goddess corresponds with the *siddhi*s (lit. 'magical skills') and ritual procedures ascribed to Dhūmāvatī. With no exception, the goddess is closely associated with *śatrunigraha* (lit. 'restraining an enemy') and *uccāṭana* (lit. 'dispelling'), and her ritual is entirely tailored to render enemies inoffensive or harmless. Naturally, iconography, character, function, and ritual mutually influence each other. The harmful, terrifying, and dangerous potential ascribed to Dhūmāvatī stretches across all aspects of her Tantric representation.

Only in the late nineteenth century, in the nearly contemporaneous texts *Mantramahārṇava* and *Śāktapramoda*,[11] does a transformation become visible. For the first time in her textual history, Dhūmāvatī is praised in longer hymns (namely in *stotra*, *kavaca*, *hṛdaya*, *śatanāmastotra*, and *sahasranāmastotra*). These poetic hymns now also contain ideas and beliefs from a sanskritized Hindu orthopraxy *in addition* to the established Tantric exoteric representation and ritual practice. It is quite late in her textual tradition that we first find tendencies of 'saumyaization' as well as general unifying tendencies trying to propagate a new identity for Dhūmāvatī as belonging to the pantheon of pan-Hindu goddesses. This goes so far as to partially identify Dhūmāvatī with the virtuous Durgā-Mahādevī, acting in favor of the universe and of human beings. But interestingly, at no point do the attempts at this seem to aim at

9 *Dhūmāvatī-dhyānamantra*, *paṭala* 7 of the *Phetkāriṇītantra*, translated by the author.

10 For a discussion of Dhūmāvatī paintings from different periods and regions, see Bühnemann 2000: 123.

11 For the background and dating of both sources, see Zeiler 2011: 64–8 and 2012: 176–7 and 181–2.

fully concealing Dhūmāvatī's Tantric identity. On the contrary, it is typical for the hymns in *Mantramahārṇava* and *Śāktapramoda* to propagate both identities side by side. The hymn *hṛdaya*, for instance, states:

> Requested by the gods she was born as the destroyer of Asuras. I worship this smoke-shaped one, who mutters and roars aloud.[12]
>
> I worship Dhūmāvatī, who destroyed Andhaka, whose form is darkness, who looks like a rain of smoke and whose bun of hair is untied, the wise one.[13]

Dhūmāvatī is here linked to Durgā – by placing her birth in the mythological context of Durgā's origin in the first verse and by identifying her with Durgā as the destroyer of Andhaka in the second verse – as much as she is linked to her own original textual Tantric background – by calling her a smoky figure uttering unconventional sounds in the first verse, and by presenting the iconographical characteristics of Dhūmāvatī's Tantric visualization as having untied hair and being closely connected to smoke in the second verse. Such an interweaving of Tantric and non-Tantric representations without particularly accentuating one over the other is characteristic for the new hymns in the late nineteenth century. Thus, even though a new sanskritized Hindu identity was partly added to the original Tantric identity, Dhūmāvatī's textual tradition has basically remained Tantric up to the present. All modern compilations on the goddess, without any exception, refer to precisely her Tantric tradition and only extremely few texts actually also include the new hymns.[14] Not one single text goes beyond this, and thus beyond accepting two identities side by side at the most. To compose and include the mentioned hymns in Dhūmāvatī's textual tradition remained the only innovations until the present.

It is all the more interesting to reflect on the outcome of the extensive fieldwork in Dhūmāvatī's temple in Banāras. Owing to the ethno-indological approach, it was possible to verify that the goddess's Tantric background played only a very minor role at Dhūpcaṇḍī, and that her representation underwent extreme transformations. In the *mohallā* named after its presiding deity, Dhūmāvatī rose from a very exclusive and restricted Tantric background to a widely known and highly important status as *mohallā devī* (lit. 'district/city-quarter goddess'). This representation dominates all aspects, beliefs, and practices in her temple. She is assigned a number of functions, for instance she is believed to be responsible for the protection of the quarter's inhabitants and their daily well-being and prosperity. As such, the goddess here exhibits many links to local popular or 'folk' beliefs and practices. This becomes clear, for instance, by looking at the practices of ritual and worship in daily routine as well as in festivals.

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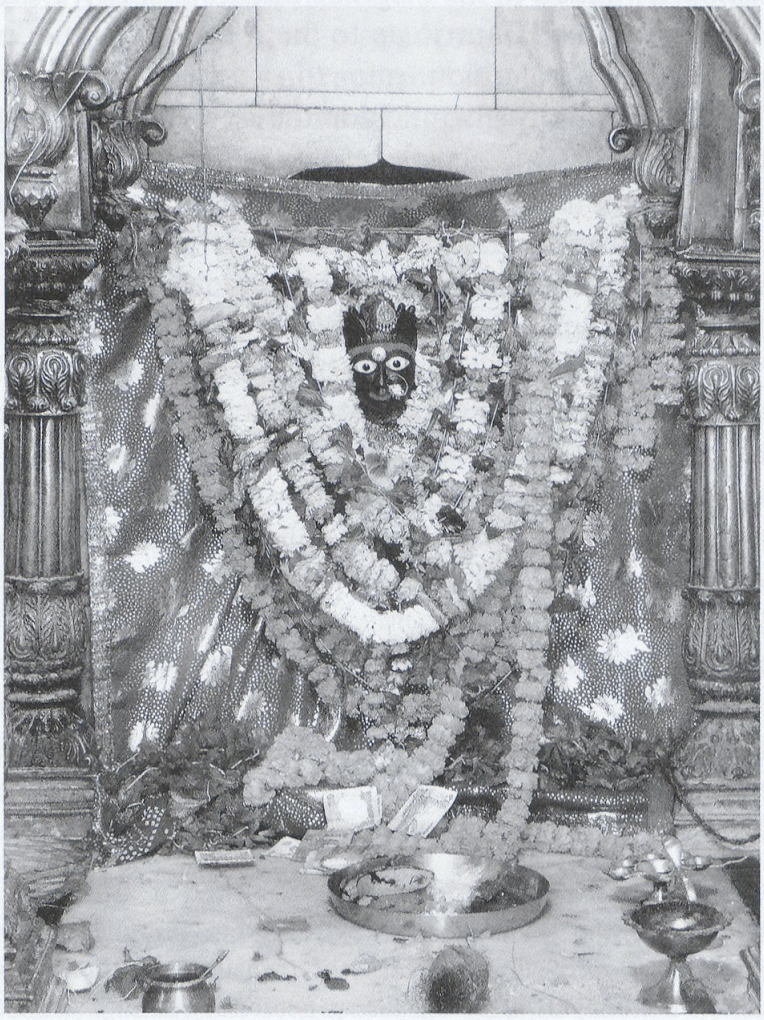
12 *Hṛdaya* of the *Dhūmāvatītantra* chapter, verse 8, translated by the author.

13 *Hṛdaya* of the *Dhūmāvatītantra* chapter, verse 17, translated by the author.

14 For compilations on Dhūmāvatī after the late nineteenth century, see Zeiler 2011: 85–97 and 2012: 182–8.

Daily, the pūjārīs conduct two simple rituals in a manner widespread in the temples of Banāras. Both are based on the purāṇic *pañcopacāra*-pūjā (lit. 'worship with five steps'). The iconographical presentation of Dhūmāvatī also widely corresponds to the usual way of presenting the statue in the city's goddess temples: she is preferably dressed in red or yellow and is adorned with a crown, ornament on the forehead, and nose-ring (see Figure 2). This clearly denotes her as a prosperous married goddess (as opposed to her Tantric status as portentous widow). Besides, the festivals celebrated in the temple also account for the closeness of the goddess to local and only partly sanskritized traditions and for her status as *mohallā devī*. In particular, lifecycle rituals and rites of passage, including wedding rituals, regularly take place in the temple. This proves how thoroughly Dhūmāvatī is understood to be a benevolent district goddess who is also responsible for the family affairs of her devotees. This was further confirmed in interviews with devotees, who consistently mentioned wishes for their business to flourish (as a basis for the material welfare of their family), for family prosperity, and to have children as their most important requests to the goddess. All mythological origin stories in her temple also stress the bond of goddess and quarter.



Dhūmāvatī statue in her temple in Banāras

In the process of Dhūmāvatī's transformation into a *mohallā devī* there are primarily two tendencies at work. Both are widespread in Hindu religious traditions. First, the recent developments in the temple Dhūpcaṇḍī are characterized by the tendency to integrate Tantric heteropraxy into Hindu orthopraxy. Though such processes are at an advanced stage in the temple, they are not yet fully concluded – rather, as in the case of the textual development, Dhūmāvatī's exoteric and esoteric representations and ritual practices at present exist side by side and are still being continually negotiated. This is especially indicated by the Tantric ritual practices conducted by a small number of devotees and some *pūjārī*s.[15] Second, like many other 'wild' goddesses, be they from a Tantric or a 'folk' background, Dhūmāvatī is liable to attempts of 'saumyaization' and unification, declaring her a (mild) manifestation of Mahādevī or Durgā. Thus the processes of transformation initiated in the late nineteenth century's textual tradition also have an effect on the Dhūpcaṇḍī temple. But it is important to note that the transformations here go one step further than the texts – important are not only 'saumyaization' and unification, but remarkably these processes are intensified in contemporary religious practice by declaring Dhūmāvatī the local presiding deity. In the concept of *mohallā devī*, a benevolent, caring, and protecting representation is already understood per se.

During my research I became aware that the functions and impacts of district deities, in Banāras and elsewhere in South Asia, stretch beyond the religious field in a narrower sense of the word. These deities also play an essential role for the general image and self-perception of the community in a city quarter, i.e. for the development, formation, and negotiation of identity. In Banāras, beside *banārsīpan*[16] as a city-wide lifestyle and a feeling of identity expanding beyond the borders of single quarters, we also find *mohallāpan*,[17] an awareness of identity in the neighborhood and community, in the quarters themselves. A powerful and well-regarded *mohallā devī* is not only important as an identification factor for the inhabitants in a certain quarter, but also for the presentation beyond the quarter, i.e. for the positioning of the *mohallā* in the city and for the delimitation of areas. Yearly festivals for district deities, which are not only visited by inhabitants of the quarter itself, also present the community beyond its own *mohallā*. Internally, in the quarter, district deities (and their festivals) sustain *mohallāpan*, and externally, in the city, they support intercommunal communication and, with this, *banārsīpan*.

Dhūmāvatī meets all these requirements; she is a prime example of a well-regarded and influential district deity in recent South Asia. Regardless of her very specialized textual representation depicting her as an exclusive Tantric deity with a very limited and exceptionally dangerous sphere of action, she was successfully transformed into a widely respected, benign, protective goddess with a sphere of action meeting the needs of her present devotees. As far as we can say, since the early nineteenth century, she has been presented in a new multifaceted and rich representation

15 See Zeiler 2011: 293–308, 319–27 and 342–7.

16 See, for instance, Katz 1993: 26–8 and Kumar 1995: 72–82.

17 See Katz 1993: 177.

in her *banārsī* temple. To me, the research on these radical transformations from text to (recent) context opened new, deep, and intense insight into the complexity and diversity of the city's religious traditions and practices. But it especially also revealed to what extent a textual tradition can be altered. This specific ethno-indological research made it very clear to me that new conditions, such as changes in communal structures or new requirements of devotees, have an essential and direct influence on transformations in the pantheon and in the belief systems of contemporary South Asia. Necessarily, changes of setting provoke a redefining of established religious patterns, deities included.

Mediatized transformations of Hinduism: the Temple of Śītalā

Not surprisingly, fieldwork in Banāras is also included in my present research project. But for this research, I will apply a new, amplified, and widened ethno-indological approach. In order to credit the recent developments and changes in South Asia, i.e. the increasing influence of modern mass media on religious traditions, I will broaden the interdisciplinarity already inherent in Ethno-Indology and include media-analytical approaches and methods in my research on recent transformations of Hindu goddesses. In the *banārsī* context, recent Hindu beliefs, symbols, and practices are being (re)interpreted and (re)constructed, especially in the press, in films and TV serials, on devotional music videos on VCD ('video compact discs'), and increasingly also on the Internet and in digital games. These new media serve as platforms for renegotiations, which may have effects reaching from the consolidation of existing religious structures, beliefs, and practices to their comlete restructuring. In either case, it is important to note that for many religious actors today the tenor of information given in a popular devotional music video is just as important and formative as information in a classical established text. In fact, it is one of the first outcomes of my recent studies that information on, for instance, deities, their iconography, mythology, or established ritual which is expressed in popular media such as film or music used on a daily basis is more important to many religious actors than the information presented in established texts. With the emergence of new media, not only a new quantity, but also a new quality of (re)negotiation is taking place.

There is no question about the massive impact of mediatization processes on religious traditions. This is true also for Hinduism in South Asia as well as in a global context. For western contexts, mediatization is an established concept that has been defined as a process with immense influence on society and culture:

> Today, we can say that mediatization means at least the following:
> (a) Changing media environments [...]
> (b) An increase of different media [...]
> (c) The changing functions of old media [...]
> (d) New and increasing functions of digital media for the people and a growth of media in general.
> (e) Changing communication forms [...] (Krotz 2008: 24)

It has been rightly argued that this also necessarily implies consequences for researching religion in the age of modern mediatization:

> Religion, we argue, cannot be analyzed outside the forms and practices of mediation that define it [...]. [T]he point is to explore how the transition from one mode of mediation to another, implying the adoption of new mass media technologies, reconfigures a particular practice of religious mediation. (Meyer and Moors 2006: 7)

Here, I want to present one example of research on mediatization in a contemporary *banārsī* religious context. To illustrate possible (re)negotiations in modern mass media and their high relevance for recent religion, I chose one type of media: the very popular VCDs with devotional songs. My study focuses on one music video in which the singer, the Bhojpurī superstar Manoj Tiwari, praises the temple of Śītalā at the banks of Gangā. In the music video *Śītalā Ghāṭ Pe Kāśī Mem* ('On Śītalā Ghāṭ in Kāśī') from 2009, we find several levels of negotiations of religious authority, including the authority of religious experts, the authority of the temple as a religious institution, and the authority and pan-Hindu influence of the goddess herself.[18]

Of course, the goddess Śītalā has a long history of negotiations and transformations, even before the age of modern mass media. Originating from a non-urban, non-brahmanic and only partially sanskritized background,[19] she was transferred into urban settings and now has also been successfully incorporated into the sanskritized tradition. Although this development started centuries ago and is accounted for in the texts,[20] processes of mediatization in the last thirty years obviously strongly supported and still support the negotiation of a 'new Śītalā,' a goddess transformed in order to fit in modern mainstream Hinduism. For instance, along with the spread in urban settings, the goddess was also successfully established as a goddess for the middle classes. Probably in connection with this, her traditional sphere of action was expanded and Śītalā is increasingly believed to govern new diseases besides smallpox, including AIDS.[21] Central to such negotiations of new functions, practices of worship, and the general status of the goddess in a pan-Hindu frame are questions of religious authority on several levels.

In his music video 'Śītalā Ghāṭ Pe Kāśī Mem' (2009), Manoj Tiwari sings:

> It is the bank of Gangā, it is the Kāśī town of Bābā Bhole, and there is Śītalā Mātā's temple at the bank of Gangā. Then how could there be no faith? [...]
>
> Mother Śītalā is the mother of the whole world and she is the happiness provider to the world. If any trouble will come in this world, if any trouble will come in this world, immediately I'll inform mother, I'll go to bend my head there at Śītalā Ghāṭ in Kāśī. [...]

18 *Śītalā Ghāṭ Pe Kāśī Mem* in the devotional VCD-album *Bāḍī Śer Par Savār*, T Series, New Delhi, 2009.

19 See, for instance, Wadley (1980).

20 See, for instance, Stewart (1995).

21 See, for instance, Ferrari (2010).

I'll go to the Durgā temple of Durgākuṇḍ to have darśan [...]

Hey! I'll offer food to mother Annapūrṇā and to Sankaṭmocan.

By closely analyzing the narrative and the visual presentation of this music video, we can identify a complex structure of authority negotiations (see Table 1). Of course, the goddess herself is a major figure of religious authority, set in the mythological frame of the Hindu pantheon. Second, the Śītalā temple at Śītalā Ghāṭ and its status among important temples and, as such, in the general religious landscape of Banāras is an object of negotiation in the video's narrative. Third, the temple's *pūjārī*s are visually set in scene in the video as the only authorized religious experts. Questions of authority are relevant on even another level. The video stages one of the most important Bhojpurī-language superstars, Manoj Tiwari, who belongs to the Bhojpurī-speaking community that constitutes the largest number of Śītalā devotees in general, and certainly the largest in Banāras. He is often perceived as 'one of us' and his appearance in the video surely adds authority to the information presented for many listeners.

This small study exemplifies the extent to which existing structures and beliefs may be negotiated in modern mass media. In the case presented here, we first find a clear propagation and consolidation of existing personalized authorities, namely of the temple-owner family Paṇḍey, which belongs to one of the most influential temple-owner families in the city with administrative shares in many important temples. The family provides all *pūjārī*s in the Śītalā Ghāṭ temple, and some of them are visualized in the video. Second, the video actively tries to increase or upgrade the existing institutionalized authority of the temple by directly equating it with other major temples in Banāras. But the video goes even further and, like many other recent VCDs with devotional songs for goddesses, places Śītalā in a particular setting, namely that of praising the pan-Hindu Mahādevī Durgā. By defining Śītalā as one aspect of Durgā and by *de facto* equaling both goddesses, the already existing mythological authority of Śītalā is massively strengthened. Accordingly, in the eyes of her devotees, Śītalā is part of the pan-Hindu pantheon. Thus this music video particularly contributes to the forming of a 'new Śītalā' in recent Hinduism. Even though it stages a specific *banārsī* background, it is received by a large audience, far beyond the city. Future research will have to verify precisely how this new information is integrated into individual beliefs and practices by the religious actors themselves.

Table 1 Music video 'Śītalā Ghāṭ Pe Kāśī Mem' by Manoj Tiwari, 2009. Authority negotiations implemented in the video and levels of authority

Authority negotiations implemented in the video	**Levels of authority**
• Direct visual embedding of the official *pūjārī*s from the owner family in the video • Embedding the temple into local temple hierarchies in the narrative, linking the temple to the pilgrimage centre Banāras (Durgā, Annapūrṇā, Sankaṭmocan) • Embedding Śītalā in a VCD praising the panhindu Mahādevī Durgā (VCD 'Bāḍī Śer Par Savār,' lit. 'She Who Rides a Lion')	• Local level, temple-wide: personal authority (of religious experts as exclusively in charge) • Regional level, city-wide and beyond: institutional authority (of the temple as influential shrine) • Pan-Hindu level, nation-wide: mythological authority (of the goddess as supra-regional, pan-Hindu deity)

Conclusion: a vote for expanding Ethno-Indology

From my first visit on, there was no doubt that Banāras was going to affect and shape me on an academic as well as a personal level. I owe innumerable magnificent experiences and astonishing insights to the city and its lifestyle, and *banārsī* friends have had a large impact on me. In this article, I have primarily concentrated on how my academic research in the city underwent reflection and progress.

During my recurring visits for ethno-indological projects, one of the issues I increasingly became aware of was the change based on mediatization in everyday life. The intensified media production, use, and reception has led to a complete rearrangement of the religious setting in Banāras in the last 15 years. For instance, while there were nearly no signs of the new media in and around the temple of Dhūpcaṇḍī in the major phase of my fieldwork from 2002 to 2006, the first thing I came across while visiting the temple in 2010 was a video shoot for a VCD, with devotional songs, staging the goddess and her temple. The goddess, who was not very important beyond the *mohallā* before and whose representations were negotiated within this specific frame, is now propagated and renegotiated on a very broad, in fact pan-Hindu, scale. Such developments finally led me to fundamentally reconsider my research interests and foci and, along with this, my methodological approaches to studying South Asian religions.

To research South Asian religious traditions in view of the new realities of present-day life means relying on the well-proven approaches – with amendments to address those new realities. As religious beliefs, symbols, practices, etc. are (re) interpreted and (re)constructed in modern mass media as much as in historical texts or as in lived practices, Ethno-Indology has to include the study of modern mass media as a new domain in the study of context. This extension or specification of the contemporary context seems all the more consistent regarding the acknowledgement of contexts, which is a priori inherent in the approach. To study in practical terms new media and their effect on South Asian religious beliefs and practices, Ethno-Indology needs to draw on methods from a number of disciplines,

including, for instance, methods from visual anthropology and from the analysis of film, audio and web material in addition to the established methods of ethnological fieldwork.

Apart from this, it seems to me that there is one more reason to argue for an expansion or widening of the approach. I pointed out earlier that, in my opinion, Ethno-Indology offers a solid methodology to study transformations in South Asian religious traditions – be they Hindu, Tantra, Jain, or other. But Ethno-Indology in fact is also a solid methodology with which to study the complex and multifaceted structures of recent religion. As much as the established approach contextualizes texts – by studying recent practices and interpretations around these very texts – it also, of course, contextualizes recent practices – by studying their historical textual base(s). This seems important to me as thorough research on the influential field of mediatization of South Asian religions should best be undertaken with attention to the scriptural bases of the beliefs, symbols, practices, etc. which are (re)interpreted and (re)constructed in modern mass media. A large number of the (re)negotiated issues in the so-called new media based on established texts and both textual backgrounds and new mediatized interpretations necessarily have to be studied in relation to each other. In the study of recent South Asian religious traditions it is therefore, in my understanding, as essential to keep the textual backgrounds and bases of recent mediatized issues in mind as it is to accept that today's contexts are widely mediatized. An expanded Ethno-Indology draws attention to these reflections and offers a fruitful approach for researching South Asian religions, from historical textual as well as recent textual, practical, and mediatized perspectives.

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Moments of Discovery in the City of Light: Proud tribals, Viśvanāth plays Holī, and the Potter's Taziya

Marc J. Katz

A prologue

My first visit to Banāras was in 1968 as a participant in the University of Wisconsin College Year in India Program. For a young third-year university student every day in Banāras was a day of discovery. And, as I was to learn via many later visits to the Holy City, there remains so much to be discovered. The 'Great Place of Pilgrimage' (*mahātīrtha*, *mahāsaṅgam*)[1] of Banāras has brought together multiple currents of Indian tradition for at least 3000 years. Reflecting many of these different currents, each neighbourhood (*mohallā*) of the city has a special character and composition of socio-economic, ethnic and cultural diversity. Each *mohallā* has its own particular mix of culture and traditions representing both ancient, less ancient, and more contemporary trends. The cultural matrix, or potpourri, is complex. There can exist no one definitive description of Banāras. Through good fieldwork new revelations are continuously made. More than forty years of observations allow for reflections over cultural/religious change and continuity. Turning the corner in the journey through the streets and lanes of Banāras often challenges older perceptions.

This essay presents three separate 'turning-the-corner discoveries' made in Banāras while researching three independent projects, and spanning a period of more than 40 years: 1) the proud tribals of Pushkar Pond (1986–2009), 2) Viśvanāth Śiva plays Holī (*holī*) (1969–1995), and 3) the Potter's *imambara* and *taziya* of Śivālā (2002–2003).

'Discovery', as used in the title, is a misleading term and actually refers to personal discovery, revelation, or 'moments of awakening'. Neither Christopher Columbus nor Leif Ericsson "discovered" America – it had been already there and populated for several millennia. So, too, my 'discoveries' in Banāras are merely 'moments of awakening' for myself, a Western and Indian educated Indologist, who sorely needed tangible contact with the field in order to clarify, and in many cases correct, classroom and library education. Over the course of time I have had innumerable experiences in Banāras that might be called 'turning-the-corner discoveries". That is the attraction. Banāras indeed is the 'City of Light'.

1 *Mahātīrtha*, 'Great Place of Pilgrimage' or 'Great Place of Fording the River of Life', i.e., Banāras; *mahāsaṅgam*, 'Great Confluence of Rivers (Minds, Ideas and Souls)', i.e., Banāras.

1. 1986–2009: Proud Tribals of Pushkar Pond

As a student I learned that in Indian villages and cities there were people who identified themselves as *ādivāsī* (tribal) with an *anārya* (non-Aryan) ancestry. This was confirmed when researching the ritual dramas, the *lilā*s, of Banāras. The boatmen (*mallāh*) of Banāras often refer to themselves, and sometimes even title themselves, as Niśād tribals. The legendary Niśād were the liminal tribal boatmen/fishermen who occupied both the Aryan (*ārya*) northern shore and the non-Aryan (*anārya*) southern shore of the Ganges near Allahabad when Rām is said to have started his journey through the microcosmos or sacred circle (*maṇḍala*) of India. Rām was transported to the *anārya* south by Guha, the king of the Niśāds.[2] Boatmen of Banāras still refer to this meeting of Rām with the Niśād king as the divine moment when their ancestors were uplifted through their meeting with God and became *ārya*.[3] Thus the boatmen of Banāras have their given roles as Guha and the Niśād tribals in the community dramatizations of the story of Rām, the Rāmlīlā.[4]

When researching the Rāmlīlā of Banāras (1986–1993) I was surprised to find yet another local community, identifying themselves as tribals, who maintained a long-time and intimate relationship with the Rāmlīlā of Assī. I recorded the following:[5] This community refers to themselves as Goṇṛ and has traditionally served as important participants in the Assī Nākkaṭaiyā Līlā procession by drawing and servicing the trolleys and holding significant character roles in the floats mounted on these trolleys, known as *lāg* and *vimān*. The floats are constructed together with local metalworkers who expertly arrange a system of metal lattices and supports on which costumed children, representing the gods, are placed. The end result is an artistic illusion of flight, or hovering, above the trolley.

The Goṇṛ resided in a cluster of simple households adjacent to the Pushkar Pond (*kuṇḍ*) in the outskirting southern Banāras neighborhood of Nagwa. This socially low-caste group with a past associated with tribal culture is perhaps related to the larger Central Indian tribal group known as the Goṇḍ (*Goṇḍ*).[6] The Goṇṛ of Nagwa

2 The *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsīdās refers to Guha as the Niśād king of Shringavera, an ancient city on the bank of the Ganges near present-day Allahabad.

3 Katz 2007: 73–82. The term *ārya* refers to those, both tribals (*ādivāsī*) and non-tribals, who have contact with the illuminating knowledge of the Veda. Vālmīki, the sage who authored the first Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* was an *anārya* tribal and became *ārya* in his meeting with the boy-God Rām. Divine knowledge was imparted in the meeting, thus turning the *anārya* to *ārya*.

4 Besides representing Guha and the Niśād in the Rāmlīlā of Assī, the boatmen of Assī have more traditional roles. They propel the effigy of the evil giant snake, the *Kāliya Nāg,* which floats in the Ganges at Tulsī Ghāṭ during the dramatization of *Nāgnathaiyā Kṛṣṇa Līlā.* Boatmen also serve as the protectors of the *svarūp* Krishna who dramatically jumps into the river to battle the snake. (Katz 2007: 51–54)

5 Katz 2007: 56–57, 93–94.

6 See also M. A. Sherring, who speculates upon the Banāras Goṇṛ relationship to the tribal Goṇṛ, or Goṇḍ of Central India, in *Hindu Tribes and Castes as Represented in Benares*, Vol. I, pp. 339–340.

were also called a sub-clan of the North Indian agricultural service and palanquin-bearing caste known as Kahār. They claimed that their caste origin is traceable to the marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī. Their myth of creation, as related in their own oral tradition, was well known by all members of their Nagwa community, including small children. The content of this clan myth also sheds light on the Goṇṛ association with the Nākkaṭaiyā Procession. The following rendition is from Parmeshvari Devi, the elderly matriarch of the Goṇṛ of Nagwa:

> The gods in attendance at Śiva's marriage convinced the groom (Śiva) that he needed to find a suitable transport for his bride (Pārvatī) since his own vehicle – the bull Nandī – was unfitting for such a fine lady. Śiva therefore dug up some common clay and formed four piles. From each of these piles arose a bearer: the four progenitors of the four Kahār clans who carried the wedding palanquin, in which Pārvatī rode. The Kahār, even at birth, were very fond of the intoxicating juice of the palm tree, the toddy. When they arrived with Pārvatī's palanquin at the home of Śiva, they were all drunk and immediately fell asleep. Shortly after the bridal palanquin arrived, the goddess Lakshmi emerged from Śiva's house to reward the bearers for their effort. A Baniya (a Vaiśya merchant) stepped forward and explained that the bearers had fallen asleep out of drunkenness, but he would gladly accept the reward for himself. Lakṣmī gave the Baniya the reward of worldly success. She cursed the Kahār with the task of forever carrying heavy burdens and never achieving great wealth. After they awoke from their drunken stupor, each of the four palanquin bearers departed in separate directions each representing one of the four quadrants where the four Kahār clans reside: The Dhuriya departed to the East. The Kharvara departed to the North. The Jaisvara departed to the West. And the Goṇṛiya (or Goṇṛ) departed to the South.[7]

As this legend suggests, the Goṇṛ are said to be people of the earth, and though impecunious, nevertheless a people of great strength. They are proud of their heritage and the mythologically associated role they play in Banāras tradition and ritual. Even today the Goṇṛ are employed for the purpose of bearing the wedding processional palanquins utilized in the Banāras area village districts and by traditional families of Banāras city proper. The female members of the Rāmnagar royal family are carried by Goṇṛ bearers from scene to scene during the performance of the Rāmnagar Rāmlīlā. And, at the occasion of the Assī Nākkaṭaiyā, a large number of processional floats, including the cherubic portrayals of wedding couples, are transported by trolley-rickshaws driven or owned by Goṇṛ. Perhaps most interesting is the long-standing Nagwa Goṇṛ tradition of casting children from their clan in the proces-

7 The creation myth of the Kahār and Goṇṛ was related by different persons on separate occasions, in tape recorded interviews with Parmeshvari Devi of the Nagwa Goṇṛ and various members of her family, on February 10, 1990, and in a tape recorded interview with Raja Rām, a 35-year-old trolley-rickshaw driver of the Nagwa Goṇṛ, on February 10, 1990. Though M. A. Sherring (1974: 340) distinguishes between the Goṇṛ and Goṇṛiya, the local Nagwa Goṇṛ family, and other Banārasi informants, make no such distinctions and claim that 'Goṇṛiya' is the local Bhojpuri form for 'Goṇṛ'.

sional roles of Śiva and Pārvatī, artistically displayed in the magical metal *lāg* arrangements of the Assī Nākkaṭaiyā procession.

The 'Myth of the Goṇṛ' was related to me by Parmeshvari Devi, the matriarch grandmother of the largest of the Goṇṛ families of Nagwa. Her name is indicative of her strong Śaiva affiliation. She proudly presented her six-year-old grandson who was honored with the role of Śiva in a *lāg* of the Assī Nākkaṭaiyā procession of 1989. She explained the personal importance of this role: 'We believe in Śaṅkar (Śiva) because we received our birth through Śaṅkar.'[8] A crowd of Goṇṛ gathered during the interview. Many, if not most, claimed that they too had in their youth portrayed either Śiva or Pārvatī in the magical *lāg* floats of the Nākkaṭaiyā. Many photos were produced to substantiate their claims. Parmeshvari Devi and the Goṇṛ of Nagwa were evidently quite proud of their participation within the Assī Rāmlīlā and their inclusion within the community of Tulsīdās.

To what extent the boatmen of Assī and those families calling themselves the Goṇṛ of Nagwa are indeed 'tribal' is not the issue. The important point to emphasize is that they maintain an *ādivāsī* 'low-caste' self-identity with pride – a working class pride of earning their sustenance through honest hard labor in contrast to the deceitful Baniya in Parmeshvari Devi's story. And, moreover, they express a deep sense of inclusion within both the Līlā and community of Rām.

Tulsīdās further legitimized the ongoing process of tribal acculturation of his time. Two hundred and fifty years later, tribal acculturation was still in progress and quite apparent in Banāras. M.A. Sherring, writing in the 1860's, reports that there were as many as 33,000 Vindhya Range Bhar tribals within Banāras (district) struggling through the process of cultural assimilation: 'In most of the cities and towns, and in not a few of the villages likewise, scattered members of the tribe are found. They exhibit little tribal cohesiveness, or *esprit de corps* [...]' (Sherring 1974: 373). Today, however, the Kol-Bhīl and Niśād passages of Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas* and their dramatization within the Assī Rāmlīla, primarily carry 'low-caste' associations with which a wide range of Banārsī Līlā spectators can identify. The tribal/Śūdra association is an intentional by-product of Tulsi's theme – perhaps reflecting the presence of more 'incorporated', caste-denominated tribals (or Śūdra) than 'unincorporated', un-denominated tribals in 16th-17th-century Banāras. I refer to Bhārat's momentous first encounter with Guha. Bhārat, the divine brother of Rām, is said to have affectionately hugged Guha as he would hug Lakṣmaṇ, i.e. as his own brother. As reported in Tulsī's *Rāmcaritmānas*: 'Even a Caṇḍāla, a Sāvara, a Khāsa, a stupid foreigner, an outcast, a Kol, or a Kirāta, by repeating the name of Rāma becomes wholly pure and renowned throughout the world.'[9]

8 Tape-recorded interview with Parmeshvari Devi, February 10, 1990.

9 Growse 1987: 337, Hill 1952: 239–240, Prasad 1989: 371–372. See also Growse's notation (1987: 337): 'The word translated '*Chandala*' is in the original *Sva-paca*, literally 'a dog-cooker,' i.e. either one who feeds on dog's flesh, or who cooks food for dogs – 'a dog keeper.' *The Laws of Manu* (X.51–56) (Bühler 1969: 414–415) equate the 'Chandala' and the 'Shvapach', stating that they both should live outside the village, by the same rules, and perform

The inclusion of tribal elements in the community of Rām, and their union with God, is clearly demonstrated in the final dramas of the Rāmlīlā. Following local tradition, the concluding procession of the Assī Bhāratmilāp Līlā halts for a moment of mutual respect. Rām and his divine brothers, known as *svarūp*[10], are presented to a low-caste family of Assī boatmen. These boatmen title themselves as Niśād and symbolically represent Guha and the Niśād – for both the audience observing this intimate-level performance and in their own everyday consciousness. Witnessing this paradigmatic event in 1986 was Vinod, a 12-year-old Līlā devotee whose father ferries passengers across the Ganges in the same manner as the mythical Niśād tribal-boatmen. Thus, Vinod received an ancient message of divine and brotherly communion. The didactical experience is known as *sākhya rasa*, the 'sentiment of love and friendship', and is found throughout the 16th century text and dramatic production of Tulsīdās. The intentions of the saint's text and Līlā are identical. The effects are tantamount.

An epilogue

Since 2005 I have held annual workshops on 'neighborhood studies' for the students of the Malaviya Centre for Peace Research (MCPR) at Banāras Hindu University (BHU). The students are carefully divided into working groups and each group is assigned a different neighborhood for their study of neighborhood traditions. I regularly visit the student groups in the field while they collect their information. In 2009 I arranged to meet the Nagwa group for discussions at a pleasant teashop with a quiet courtyard near the Ravidās Park in Nagwa. While sipping tea we struck up a conversation with the two brothers who ran the teashop. The question was raised, 'which communities reside in Nagwa?' It was mentioned that there were many milkmen (*yādav/āhir*) in Nagwa, and someone asked the young managers (in their late teens or early twenties) if they were Yādavas. Their automatic and unpretentious response was: 'No. We are *ādivāsī*! We are Goṇṛ!' There was a sense of unashamed pride in their voice.

Urban development has changed the face of Banāras. What were previously unattractive and easily flooded low lands and bushy fields in Nagwa have been developed. Some clusters of mud hut dwellings still remain. But the simple cluster of village-like

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the same functions. The Shavara (or Shabar) were most likely an Austric/Kolerian tribe of Orissa and Central India and are described in both the Vedas and the Epics (Kane 1974, vol. 2: 96; Walker 1983, vol. 1: 558; vol. 2, 172–176). *The Laws of Manu* (X.22) (Bühler 1969: 406) define Khasha as the offspring of a Vrātya (outcaste) and Kṣatriya. Some editions of Manu refer to Khasha as 'degenerate' Kṣatriya (i.e., Vrātya) who have 'gradually sunk in this world to the condition of Shudra' through neglect of their Vedic duties and disrespect for Brahmins (X. 43–44. Bühler 1969, n. 44: 412–413). The *Vayu Purana* (II.1.124, Tagare 1987–88: 467) names Khasha as one of the three tribes of the Vindhyas descended from the Niśād and created from the sacrifice of Vena. Kol and Kirāt are tribal designations.

10 *Svarūp*s are male Brahmin child actors of the Rāmlīlā and the Kṛṣṇalīlā regarded as the temporary residence of the deities they depict. Here the term *svarūp* refers to the reunited four divine brothers, Rām, Bhārat, Lakṣmaṇ and Śatrughna.

homes of the Goṇṛ, which I first visited in 1986, no longer exists. It has been replaced by apartment buildings and upper scale homes. The Goṇṛ had previously occupied this land for generations. Now they were dispersed. I am sorry to say that I do not know if they have maintained, in their diaspora, their intimate relationship with the Assī Rāmlīlā. But, in 2009 I met two proud and self-aware young men (who were probably not even born in 1986) who clearly stated without a hint of shame: 'We are *ādivāsī*! We are Goṇṛ!'

2. 1969–1995: *Viśvanāth Plays Holī*

My first experience of Holī, the important springtime festival of North India, was as a twenty-year-old student at Delhi University in 1969. It was important for us students on the day of wet-color play that besides coloring each other and everyone in our student hostel, we visit our professors. I remember visiting the homes of the anthropology professor M.N. Srinivas and Hindi professor Usha Jain (among others). We playfully smeared them with color, and they us, and afterwards we were invited for small refreshments. There was a strange and wonderful equality and informality to the day. Wandering the campus and adjacent neighbourhoods with Indian students, I was no longer the foreign student but instead a full member of the clan. As we passed through one narrow residential lane an extraordinary meeting occurred. Everyone moving through this lane was first escorted by the residents to a garden, where a large tub of colored water was arranged. No one escaped. Several friendly and strong arms lifted each and every visitor and deposited them into the tub. One after one, each visitor was immersed. No one was excluded. Thereafter, freshly colored with a purplish-red nuance, friendly hugs and snacks were offered. The elder of one of these host families gently hugged me after my baptismal immersion. Holding on to my newly colored arm, he extended his own purplish-red forearm in comparison. He said in explanation: 'Look! You see: in reality we are all one color! We are the same! Everything else is illusion! Many *ātman* (individual souls), but one *brahmānd* (Universal Soul)!'

In 1969 I took many snapshots with my newly purchased, and easily handled, Kodak Instamatic. I wanted to record all the colorful events of that mind-changing day. Someday, I told myself, I would make a film. After having subsequently re-played Holī many times in the sacred city of Banāras, I finally arranged financing for a Holī film in 1994–1995. I immediately set about researching the topic. Of course I was already well familiar with the now classical anthropological assessment of *lāṭhī*-Holī in Mathura district as presented by the University of Chicago anthropologists McKim Mariott and Victor Turner. But ever since that eventful baptism in the Holī of 1969, I had felt that there was indeed more to the celebration than simply a moment 'ritual inversion' where the lower echelons of society were allowed to run amuck and rule for a day. I had felt the *communitas*. But I had experienced an 'all-inclusive' *communitas*. It was more than an instant of liminality.[11]

11 Holī in Mathura district (Uttar Pradesh), where women commonly beat men with sticks

I sought the advice of many Banārasīs. I posed the questions: 'How do you celebrate and play Holī? What is the significance of Holī? Who celebrates Holī? Why? What should I include in a film on Holī?' I asked temple priests and persons well acquainted with orthodox (*śāstrik*) ritual and literature. I asked high caste Banārasīs, middle caste Banārasīs, and low caste Banārasīs. I asked women and children. The major criteria was that they should be born Banārasī. I interviewed formally educated Banārasīs and those without education. Westernized friends and acquaintances residing within the protective walls of the new colony estates or the Banāras Hindu University, many of whom were not 'true Banārasīs', could not understand my purpose. The same response could also come from those who had turned their backs on what they regarded as merely 'folk (*laukik*) tradition', and rigorously avoided the street fairs (*melā*) of Banāras. They asked me: Why research and make a film about Holī – a vulgar and dirty event for the low caste and 'lumpenproletariat'? This is not the true Indian tradition, they insisted. But many 'true Banārasīs' residing in the heart of the city, regardless of caste and class, seemed to understand my purpose and encouraged me to look at the wonder of Holī – the rejuvenating springtime ritual in all of its facets.[12] A picture slowly emerged revealing a sequence of related ritual events, which may be called the Holī season. The greater Holī was much more than an isolated event of wanton drunkenness, debauchery, and wild color play. In its entirety, Holī could be seen as a healthy series of welcome annual rituals resulting in a symbolic cleansing, melding and renewal of a multi-cultural community. It became apparent that Holī is not merely a festival for the low-caste, but for all.

As is common for major ritual festivals, there are a number of preparatory Holī rituals that serve both to awaken the anticipation and to underline the importance of Holī. The preparatory rituals of Holī are often communally inclusive and begin approximately a month prior to the lighting of the Holī fire. The Basant Pañcamī and Sarasvatī Pūjā are considered to be the starting point of the springtime Holī season. Basant Pañcamī is literally the fifth day of spring and the start of the two-day festival for the goddess of the arts and education, the Sarasvatī Pūjā. The occasion is traditionally observed in homes and in most educational institutions of Banāras.[13] The Sarasvatī Pūjā is characterized by the central role of community youth (as in Holī) and their street-side establishment of extravagantly decorated clay Sarasvatī images in provisionally erected tents for worship (*pūjā paṇḍāl/maṇḍap*) in almost every neighbourhood of the city.[14] These public "neighbourhood celebrations" are

(*lāthī kī holī*, *Mathura kī holī*), is described by Marriott (1968: 200–212). See also Victor Turner's commentary in Turner 1977: 185–188.

12 Encouraging voices included Veer Bhadra Mishra (d. 2013), the former *mahant* of the Sankat Mochan temple (Katz 1996).

13 Christian missionary schools and Muslim madrasas do not normally organize school celebrations of the Sarasvatī Pūjā. However, many Christians and Muslims (and students of these schools) will join in the celebration either as individuals or as active members of a Sarasvatī Pūjā society.

14 Students of the Malaviya Centre for Peace Research (MCPR) at Banāras Hindu University

mostly organized by student societies and youth organizations – often created by the neighbourhood youth for the sole purpose of performing the Sarasvatī Pūjā. The Sarasvatī Pūjā is an important exercise in communal inclusion encompassing all sectors of Banāras society. Many, if not most, of the Sarasvatī clubs and societies are multi-ethnic/class/caste and represent all the four *varṇa* and the many *jāti* of the neighbourhood.[15] The concluding ritual procession is generally held on the evening of the second day when the clay statues of the goddess are carried in revelry and pomp through the community to the riverside ghāṭ and a final dissolving immersion in the Gaṅgā. The play with dry color powder during this closing processional phase of the Sarasvatī Pūjā is a forewarning of the wanton gaming during the oncoming celebration of Holī. It is also generally understood that the Sarasvatī Pūjā colors only represent a 'smattering of the spring' that is unleashed in full glory at the time of Holī. Immediately after the conclusion of the celebration of Sarasvatī, community youth will meet and start planning their next ritual adventure: the organization of the community Holī fire and celebration. Immediately after the Sarasvatī Pūjā, one finds that in the open spaces of Banāras neighbourhoods the Holī bonfire heaps are already in place. And though these piles of burnable refuse are at first small, they noticeably grow in size day by day.

A week prior to the festival of Holī, wherever one turns in Banāras there are indications of spring and Holī. One reliable sign is that the neighbourhood Ashok trees have blossomed in colorful glory. In the early morning hours the shopkeepers of the bazaars rearrange their stalls and begin displaying the implements of Holī play: color powder, squirting instruments, and festive hats. In the adjacent rural areas, the play with color has already had its soft start. Milkmen and villagers, who supply the city with foodstuffs and wares, are seen bicycling into the city in clothes spattered with red color. Wherever one wanders, in all neighbourhoods of the city, from dusk to dawn, one finds multi-caste groups (*maṇḍal*) of friends and neighbours, cheerfully gathered in some residence or public place where they passionately sing the folk songs of the season. These are the teasing songs of love and spring, the *phagua* and *viraha*, and the (often lewd) melodies known locally as *holī* and *kabīr*.

Raṅgbarī Ekādaśī

Researching and understanding the day known as Raṅgbarī Ekādaśī in 1995 was definitely a 'turning-the-corner awakening' for me. Four days prior to the burning of the Holīkā fire, and five days prior to the play with colors, the Holī festival is officially started by the deities of the city. The day is known as Raṅgbarī Ekādaśī, the Colorful Eleventh. This is the eleventh day of the lunar month of Phalgun. On this

(BHU), working under my supervision in 2009 recorded sixteen Sarasvatī clubs/societies in Nagwa and twenty in the Assī neighborhood known as Bhadaini.

15 For the communal inclusive aspect of these clubs and societies see Katz 2007: 220–260 and Katz 2005. Fieldwork research conducted under my supervision by the MCPR at BHU during 2005–2010 has reconfirmed the communally inclusive aspects of a majority of Sarasvatī Pūjā clubs and societies in south Banāras.

day, the deities of Banāras symbolically receive a spattering of the red colored powder known as *abir*. Even the temple ponds, such as the famous pond of Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ, will be colored.[16] These ponds symbolize the divine womb, the mother deity, from whom all life is brought forth. A popular Banāras event, drawing many observers, is the annual draining and subsequent coloring, with handfuls of red *abir* powder, of the important Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ – said to be the first pond and first place of pilgrimage in Indian tradition. The melodious Sanskrit ceremony is performed under the leadership of one of the famous and most respected Brahmin Pandas of the city. Both the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* of the *Skandapurāṇa*, and the *Śivapurāṇa* state the ancient Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ to have been carved from the earth by Viṣṇu himself. Using his discus, Viṣṇu dug the pond in his very first act of creation. He filled the cavity with the sweat of his toil, producing the first life-giving water. Śiva, the paramount protector of Banāras, witnessing this accomplishment danced so jubilantly that his earring fell into the pond. Therefore, this sacred water and the first place of Hindu pilgrimage were named *maṇikarṇikā*, the Jewelled Earring.[17]

Symbolically, as stated in the *Śivapurāṇa*, the fruit of the Maṇikarṇikā womb are the all-inclusive creations of Puruṣa in the form of Viṣṇu, together with his consort, personified Prakṛti. It is written that the Universal Soul, the *nirguṇa* (attributeless) Brahman, creates a being with attributes, the *saguṇa* Śiva, who divides himself into two, thus forming his female consort, Śakti. Śiva and Śakti create the male Puruṣa (said in this text to be Viṣṇu) and female Prakṛti who were given the task of creating the universe. But there was no world to serve as a base for them to perform their penance (*tapas*), and generate the cosmic meditative heat needed for creation. Śiva therefore created the holy city of Banāras (extending five *krośa* = *pañcakrośī*) the first earth. After performing austerities in the newly created city of Śiva (Banāras), Puruṣa/Viṣṇu thereafter began his creation, digging the Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ with his discus. He brought forth the waters of creation (*kṣīrsāgar*), Brahmā (from his navel), the Cosmic Egg and, as is told in the Rig Veda, divided himself (i.e. Puruṣa) into the four classes (*varṇa*) of mankind. I agree with Diana Eck that Banārasīs are especially proud of Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ and are very much aware that it was here, according to Hindu tradition, that all creation began – including the all-inclusive creation of the community of Man/Woman (the four *varṇa*s from Puruṣa/Prakṛti).[18]

16 See the 1995 Raṅgbarī Ekādaśī at Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ (Katz 1996).

17 Eck 1983: 240–251. Tagare 1996: 236–238.

18 Eck 1983: 240–251, Shastri 1969: 1340–1343. The *Śivapurāṇa* states that Śiva created Banāras as Prakṛti and Puruṣa's creative base: 'Then a beautiful city endowed with requisite articles, the auspicious essence of brilliance extending to five Krośas was created and established by Śiva devoid of attributes [*nirguṇ*, my notation], in the firmament near the Purusha' (Shastri 1969: 1340). The Pañcakrośī pilgrimage of Banāras honours this creation by means of a five-day walk around the five-*krośa* border, a distance of approximately 55.2 miles. For a description of this pilgrimage see Singh and Rana 2002: 161–174. For the *Ṛg Veda* myth of Puruṣa and the creation of the four categories (*varṇa*) of Mankind see Doniger 1981: 29–32; Griffith 1992: 226–228.

In preparation for Holī, on the occasion of the Raṅgbarī Ekādaśī, the waters of the Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ are first drained and then allowed to naturally replenish from the natural underground water source (a process of spring renewal). The pond is respectfully treated as a hierophany and the fresh waters are colored red, as are all forms of godhood in the Holy City on this day. Another ever-present symbol of divine motherhood, the cow, also receives garlands and spatterings of color. Throughout the city the cow-herding Yādavs tenderly garland their cows and anoint them with dashes of red powder. Most Hindus will say that the 'One God' appears in many different forms, each form depicting a different aspect of divinity. On Raṅgbarī Ekādaśī, each and every temple image, each and every *liṅga*, each and every aspect of divinity, both male and female, receives a spattering of red color. On Raṅgbarī Ekādaśī, all godhood is united. Color serves as the dominating attribute, physically unifying and connecting all godhood into One. And soon, in the rollicking color play of Holī, all mankind will follow suit.[19]

The most prominent deity of Banāras, the creator and protector of the holy city, Viśvanāth Śiva[20], his wife Pārvatī, and their elephant headed son Gaṇeś, are the major divine actors of Raṅgbarī Ekādaśī. The bronze images of Viśvanāth Śiva and his family are normally kept in a secluded temple room within the residential palace of the high priest (*mahant*) of the Viśvanāth temple. Only on this day are the doors opened to the public. A large crowd of devotees will gather in the narrow lane leading to this abode. Due to the limitations of physical space, merely a lucky few will gain admittance to the chambers. Admittance is made on the basis of first come, first serve, and though normally only Hindus are allowed entry, the event is all-inclusive in that no one is denied entry due to religion, age, caste or gender.[21] Once inside this well-guarded and private chamber of the official Viśvanāth statue, the lucky few kneel before the deities and leave small offerings of incense and flowers. Most importantly, to help initiate the Holī festival, they gently sprinkle the images with red powder. Then the *mahant* and the priest of the Viśvanāth temple rotate flames

19 *Holī Hey: A Festival of Love, Color and Life* presents the 'coloring of all godhood' on Raṅgbarī Ekādaśī, 1995 (in order of appearance in the film): the coloring of the Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ; a Yādav milkman of Assī garlanding and spattering his cow; a priest of the Durgā Kuṇḍ temple complex coloring the statues of a small Śiva temple; the temple priest of the famous Gaṇeś temple, Durga Viṇāyak at Durgā Kuṇḍ, spattering the statue of Gaṇeś with red color; the anointment of a large Śiva liṅga at the Lolārk Kuṇḍ by several Brahmins; the coloring of the statues of Viśvanāth Śiva, Pārvatī and Gaṇeś at the palatial home of the *mahant* of the Viśvanāth temple and during their procession in Viśvanāth Lane. The procession unites the three statues with the *jyotirliṅga* of Viśvanāth Śiva inside the Viśvanāth temple. This unification of *saguṇ* and *nirguṇ* Śiva is performed only on Raṅgbarī Ekādaśī when all godhood is united in color.

20 *Viśvanāth*, Śiva as the 'Lord of All'. The term refers to the *jyotirliṅga* of the Viśvanāth temple of Banāras and to Śiva as the Lord of Banāras. Viśvanāth is also known as Viśveśvara, another epithet having the same meaning.

21 In 1995 the *mahant* of Viśvanāth Temple generously gave me permission to observe and film the events described here (Katz 1996).

and incense in front of the deities, a ceremony known as *āratī*. The gods are said to be awakened and honoured by the *āratī* flame. Thereafter Śiva and his family are ceremoniously carried by the temple priest to the main chamber of the Viśvanāth Temple – a distance of approximately 50 meters through the narrow lane. The procession moves slowly through the ocean of devotees clogging the lane. When united with the famous *jyotirliṅga* of the Viśvanāth temple[22], the statues will remain there until the close of the Holī festival. Each year thousands of devotees attempt to witness the procession of Viśvanāth Śiva's family as they are carried on the palanquin throne (*ḍolī*). The lucky few in the lane cheerfully throw handfuls of Holī colored powder at the statues. The narrow lane is filled with both the cheers of the spectators (*hara hara mahādev*!) and puffs and clouds of powder color. After the dramatic installation in the temple and symbolic unification with the *jyotirliṅga,* another *āratī* is performed. The blessing of Śiva and his family is said to be endowed in the *āratī* lamp, which in an act of brotherhood is taken from the sacred inner chamber and out again into the congested Viśvanāth lane. The lamp is passed through the crowd where many of the city's jātis and members from all the four varṇas will be present and waiting. In anticipation they pass their hands over the flame, feel the warmth and 'take *āratī*' (*āratī lena*). Symbolically Viśvanāth Śiva, with the heat of this flame, gives his blessing to all. After the conclusion of this drama, and the cheerful color play with Viśvanāth Śiva, the Holī season is officially inaugurated in Banāras.

3. 2002–2003: The Potter's Taziya *of* Śivālā.

Muharram designates both the first month of the Islamic calendar and the commemoration ceremonies for Imam Husain[23] and his fellow martyrs of Karbala in 680 C.E. In South Asia this commemoration is a *de facto* anti-war declaration where the multi-ethnic community declares that the atrocities of Karbala, the cruel treatment and slaughter of men, women and children, should never happen again. Muharram brings together the multi-ethnic community. My first research on the Muharram of

22 *jyotirliṅga*, '*liṅga* of light' a self-illuminating *liṅga* and manifestation of Śiva. There are 12 recognized *jyotirliṅga*s in India, and the *liṅga* of the Viśvanāth temple in Banāras is one of them (Eck 1983: 107–109, 120–125, 290–291). The *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* of the *Skandapurāṇa* gives supreme importance to the *jyotirliṅga* in the Viśvanāth temple: 'May all the groups of Devas, Sages and Ganas listen. I shall speak the truth and that to for helping others. Nowhere within the worlds of Bhuh, Bhuvah, Svarga, Mahah and Jana [i.e. the known worlds of the cosmos and paradise, my notation] is there a linga equal to Vishvesha.' And 'There is no linga equal to Vishvanath' (book IV. ii. 99. 49–51; Tagare 1996: 448). The *liṅga* of Viśvanāth, the water of Maṇikarṇikā, and Kāśī (i.e. Banāras) are stated to be the three most important essentialities of this world: 'Lifting up the hand, I assert again and again that, in this world having the three Vedas, only three things are essential: Vishvesha Linga, Manikarnika water and the city of Kashi. This is the truth, threefold truth' (book IV. ii. 99. 61; Tagare 1996: 449).

23 Husain ibn Ali (626–680) was the second son of Ali and Fatima (the Prophet's daughter) and thereby the Prophet's grandson. Shia tradition recognizes Husain as the Third Imam (Leader). He was martyred in 680 at Karbala, in present-day Iraq.

Banāras was ongoing during 1986–1991. In 2002 the research resumed as preparation for a film highlighting the Banāras Muharram. One day I literally stumbled upon a remarkable story, over two hundred years old, heralding multi-cultural interface in the southern Banāras *mohallā* known as Śivālā. The story portrays a young Hindu potter (*kumbhār*) who first listened to the 'other', in this case the neighboring Muslims of Śivālā, then experienced empathy and a kinship with the 'other' and thereafter joined in their celebration:[24]

> The neighborhood of Śivālā, near Assī in southern Banāras, is a community of Hindus, Sunni and Shia Muslims. Alim Husain, a retired bank manager, traces his family's Shia origins to the holy Iranian city of Moshad. For more than 200 years, at his family prayer chamber (*imambara*[25]), an important service (*majlis*[26]) has been performed, (first by women and then by men), re-establishing each year at the start of the month of Muharram, a most remarkable model shrine (*taziya*[27]). The *kumbhār kā taziya* – the paper and bamboo 'Potter's *taziya*' is modeled after a Hindu temple and the typical round cupola of an Islamic tomb (*mazar*) is replaced by a *śikhar*, a Hindu temple tower.
>
> Alim tells this story: Several hundred years ago, the young son of a Hindu potter was deeply moved by the Muharram story and songs of sorrow. He decided to make and display a clay *taziya*. The boy's father didn't approve of his son's unorthodox behavior and put a stop to his ritual. Soon thereafter, the son became seriously ill. No medicines or treatments helped. Exhausted from nursing his only son, the father fell into a deep sleep. He dreamt that a grand person came to him and said that the sick boy had shown him love and devotion. But now that this was no longer allowed the stately man had come to take the boy with him to heaven. The father recognized his mistake and promised that he would never again stop his son from expressing his love and compassion for Imam Husain and the Karbala martyrs. When he awoke, the boy was cured.

24 The story of the Potter's Taziya of Śivālā, as told by Alim Husain, a leader of the Shia community and resident of Śivālā (Kaṭz 2004).

25 *Imambara*, 'place of the Imam.' A shrine dedicated to Imam Husain and the martyrs of Karbala. Most Shia homes of Banāras have a room, or a section, which they call the imambara. Here they keep their Koran, a small permanent *taziya*, model coffins for Imam Hasan and Imam Husain, and the flags or banners dedicated to the martyrs of Karbala. The room is often large enough to hold family prayer gatherings known as *majlis*. Community imambaras are larger in size to accommodate larger *majlis*. They might also have larger processional *taziya*s on display during the Muharram.

26 *Majlis* are religious gatherings featuring poetical songs (*noha* and *salam*) and stories heralding Imam Husain and the martyrs of Karbala. Majlis occur in private homes, religious centers and public places.

27 *Taziya* in South Asia: a model tomb (*mazar*) of Imam Husain. The *taziya*s of Banāras are either temporary (made of paper and bamboo) or permanent (made of metal and often adorned with precious and semi-precious metals and gems). *Taziya*s are taken in procession, becoming movable mazars, and serving as the focal point of worship and remembrance during the Muharram.

> The belief is that Imam Husain had appeared in the potter's dream. He reappeared in the dream of a 'nawab', a noble of Śivālā who responded by donating land for an *imambara*. In yet another dream, the ancestor of Alim Husain, was requested by the grandson of the Prophet to help the Hindu potters and serve as the proprietor of their *imambara*.

So every year on the third day of Muharram, a unique paper *taziya*, formed as a Hindu temple out of respect for the Hindu potters of Śivālā, is carried through the narrow lanes of Śivālā from the home of Alim Husain to the Potter's Imambara near the Hariścandra Ghāṭ.

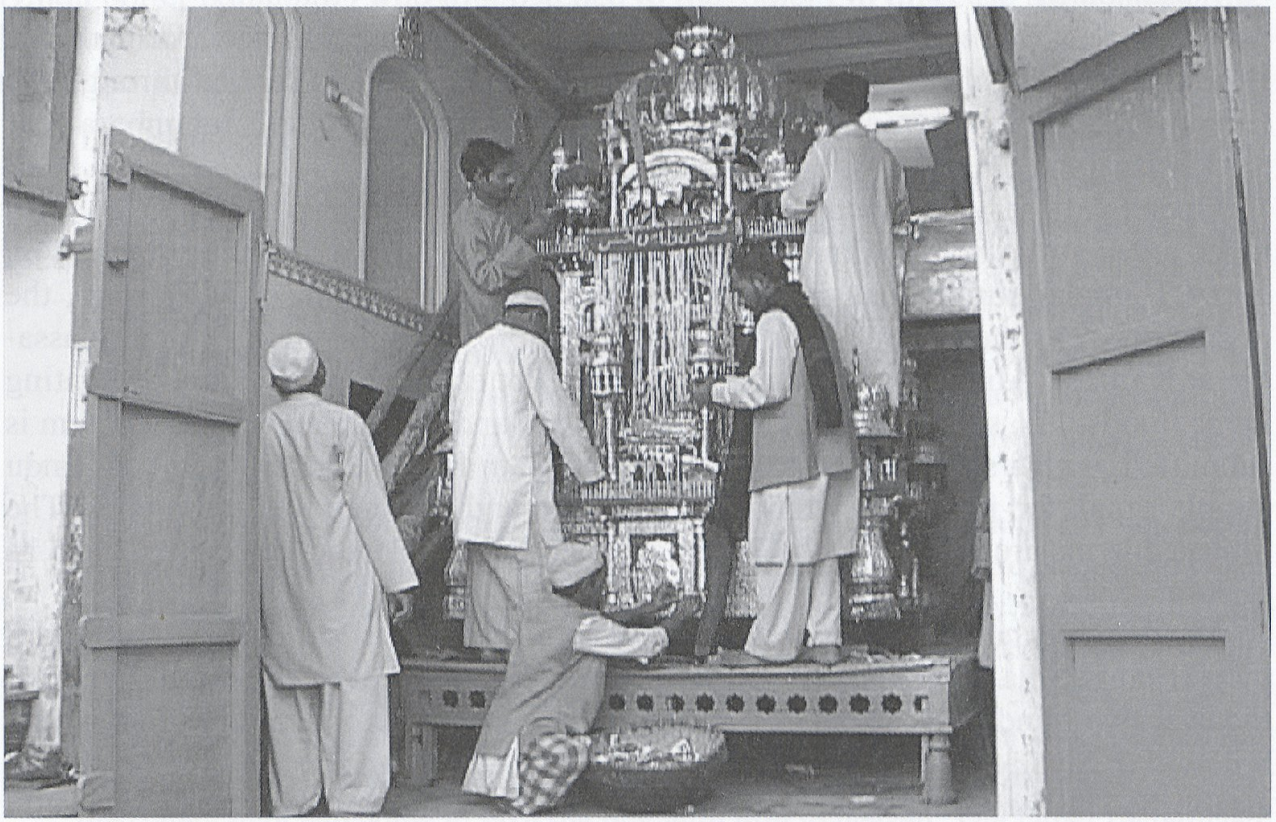
Open to all, services honoring the martyrs of Karbala, known as *majlis,* are held twice a day at the Potter's Imambara during the first ten days of Muharram and on every Thursday throughout the year. On the night of the ninth of Muharram, the night known as the Shabi Ashur[28], the night before the anniversary of the massacre at Karbala, Alim Husain stands next to the Potter's Taziya for hours presenting items (foodstuffs, sweets, cloth) from Shia, Sunni, and Hindu devotees. Each item is submitted, with a short prayer, to the spirit of Imam Husain. Reminiscent of Hindu temple ritual, the items are symbolically blessed and returned to the devotees. The returned items are referred to by Hindu devotees as the blessed leavings of God, as *prasād.*

My documentary film *Banāras Muharram and the Coals of Karbala* (2003) depicts Hindus, Shia Muslims, and Sunni Muslims (primarily Barelvi/Bareilli Sunni) at the over two-hundred-year-old Potter's Imambara located in the multi-ethnic neighborhood of Śivālā. Side-by-side they pay their respect to a *taziya* that was originally established by the local Hindu caste of potters. The Hindus participate as they would in any Hindu temple: chanting prayers, lighting incense and placing foodstuffs and sweets in front of the model tomb of Husain. These items are reverently consumed as blessed *prasād* by family and friends. Hindu men and women are depicted together with Shia and Sunni men and women, listening to the gripping Muharram songs of sorrow as they are melodiously performed by a group of Shia women.

For the first ten days of Muharram the Potter's Imambara becomes a major community gathering point in Śivālā. Here the Potter's Taziya is annually established. Here collective sorrow is expressed over the ill-deeds performed at Karbala – emblemic of ill-deeds evermore performed by men. The tenth of Muharram in 680 C. E. was the day of massacre. At 4 p.m. the final death blow is said to have been delivered and Imam Husain, the last surviving man in his troupe, was martyred. Devout Shia neither eat nor drink until after 4 p.m. The day is known as the Ashura. It is a day of burial. The *taziya*s of the homes and community, together with their decorative garlands, are laid to rest. The streets of Banāras are congested as hundreds of *taziyas*, and symbolically the martyrs of Karbala, are carried by the young men of the

28 Shabi Ashur, the ninth of Muharram. This is the eve of the Tenth of Muharram, the day of the final massacre at Karbala. Ashur(a) is the tenth in Arabic and often refers to the day of massacre.

community in funeral processions to the burial sites. Crowds gather on rooftops and along the lanes and thoroughfares to witness the spectacular processions. The public generally shows respect, some by touching the *taziyas* and hoping to receive a last-minute blessing.



Restoring the *Raṅga kā Taziya* of Banāras. From Marc Katz, *Banāras Muharram and the Coals of Karbala* (2003)

Earthen burial sites for Banāras *taziyas* are all referred to as 'Karbala'. Most *taziyas* will be taken to the large Shia compound in the center of the city and known as Fatma Dargah. Paper *taziyas* are deposited in a burial pit located in a peripheral section of the complex. Permanent *taziyas* are first stripped of their tinsel decorations and garlands (which are deposited in the pit), covered with cloth and returned, without processional cheer, to their *imambara*. They will be stored until it is time to refurbish them for the next Muharram.[29]

The inter-religious Potter's Taziya of Śivālā, and many other paper *taziyas*, are not buried in the central Fatma Dargah. Their funeral processions wander through neighborhoods in another direction: They move towards the Ganges and a water burial. Hindus call this form of burial *visarjan*, a final immersion into the river of life. Throughout the Ashura afternoon and night, *taziyas* flow through the neighbor-

29 See the restoration and procession of the famous Raṅga kā Taziya, established 1759 (wall inscription at the Raṅga kā Taziya Imambara) and maintained by the Sunni Barelvi community as shown in Katz 2004.

hoods and streets of Banāras: New and ancient, large and small, paper and permanent, spectacularly electrified and simple. Shia, Sunni – and even several Hindu processions – merge into an ocean of unity and mourning. Thousands of participants and spectators witness the symbolic melding of the processions and divergent communities into one super procession: one Banārasī community, one Banārasī identity. The result cannot be misinterpreted. Ritually, despite a myriad of ethnic and cultural nuances, Banārasīs become one with each other.

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Enchantment and Repulsion: Two Austrian *littérateurs* in Banāras

Reinhold Schein

It is a rather bold undertaking to present two extremely different writers and personalities such as Stefan Zweig and Josef Winkler in one and the same context. Only this conference, 'Banāras Revisited,' allows me to bring them together, as both these Austrian authors visited Banāras, both felt attracted as well as repelled by the city, and both wrote about their experiences.

Stefan Zweig, born 1881 in Vienna in a well-to-do Jewish family, was a highly educated man. He spoke a number of European languages fluently; he was well connected with outstanding members of the European intelligentsia in many countries. He was part of an international network of *littérateurs* and artists who campaigned for cultural exchange, friendship, and solidarity among nations. He was at home in a cosmos of arts and literature where national boundaries were irrelevant, and he abhorred the political evil spirits of his time such as nationalism, chauvinism, and militarism.

Stefan Zweig became a prolific writer, a very successful narrator, and an author of biographies. An extraordinary talent of empathy and an elegant narrative style made him very popular, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s. His books were translated into more than fifty languages. Like everybody of Jewish origin in Europe he had to suffer. Anticipating the takeover of fascism in Austria he migrated to England in 1934, and again, anticipating the Second World War, he left England for Brazil in 1938. Desperate because of his shattered humanitarian and pacifist ideals he committed suicide together with his wife in 1942.

When he set out on a journey to India and South East Asia in November 1908, he was just one of a number of German-speaking intellectuals who visited India at the beginning of the twentieth century, a few years before the First World War.[1] These journeys were a new version of the classical educational trip. There was a widespread awareness that a Eurocentric view of the world was too narrow. Unlike some of his contemporary travelers Stefan Zweig was not tired of Europe and he had no particular romantic longing for India or the East. His motive was to widen his horizon by exposing himself to a non-European culture.

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1 For instance Waldemar Bonsels (1903), Max Dauthendey (1906), Rudolf Kassner (1908), Hermann Hesse (1911), Hermann Graf Keyserling (1911), Ernst Weiß (1912/13), René Schickele (1913).

In March 1909 Zweig published a long article in a Viennese newspaper, entitled *Banāras. City of Thousand Temples*[2] in which he describes in touching words his observations on the ghāṭs and in the lanes of Banāras. He is deeply moved by the religious fervor of the pilgrims and by the citizens who come every morning to take their ablutions or to perform their prayers and rituals. A view that leaves a lasting impression on him is the Hindu rite of cremation in which he sees the great unifier of the otherwise strictly segregated caste society. His descriptions of Banāras include very beautiful as well as ugly, shocking sights.

Hindu religion is a very ambivalent experience for Zweig. On the one hand he is genuinely impressed by 'the flame of faith which burns strong and fervently below the cool glow of the [believers'] averted eyes;' on the other hand it is the same concentration on their inner life which, for Zweig, makes it comprehensible 'why these humble and silent people bear patiently with the servitude of foreign nations and the chains of their own caste system.'[3] While Zweig obviously has an empathetic understanding of the role of the river Ganges as the great purifier, he seems to misconceive the ascetic and yogic exercises he observes on the Gangā ghāṭs when he labels them as 'penitence' or 'expiation,' thus suggesting atonement for committed sins. He also repeatedly uses the words 'passionate,' 'fanatic,' or 'fanaticism' to describe the religious fervor of the believers. Proceeding into the lanes of the city he observes the daily life of the citizens. Nothing seems to remain hidden. The doors and windows are open but still their inner life remains a mystery. 'Strangeness, insurmountable strangeness is the ultimate reaction to all the feelings of this nation.'[4]

As a result of his journey to India Stefan Zweig returned home with a deeper understanding of his European identity. In his autobiography 'The World of Yesterday' he expresses many years later his reaction when he observed the privileged life style of the 'white sahibs': 'I could not get rid of the eerie feeling that the coming decades and centuries would have to bring transformations and changes of this absurd relationship which we did not dare to anticipate in our cosy and seemingly safe Europe.'[5] The consequence of his journey was at the same time the ability to look at his own European culture with different, somewhat dissociated eyes and 'not to see Europe any longer as the eternal axis of the Universe.'[6]

In 1921 Stefan Zweig's interest in India received a new boost. Rabindranath Tagore visited Germany and Austria for the first time and got an overwhelming reception.[7] Zweig wrote an extensive book review about *Sādhana*, Tagore's series of

2 Zweig 1955; reprinted in Kade-Luthra 1993: 181–9.
3 Ibid., 181. Translation of all German quotations by the author.
4 Ibid., 188.
5 Stefan Zweig, *Über Europa hinaus*, in Kade-Luthra 1993: 190. Originally published in *Die Welt von gestern. Erinnerungen eines Europäers*. Stockholm, 1944.
6 Ibid., 191
7 Zweig even rushed to the Salzburg railway station and met Tagore on his way to Vienna on 15 June 1921 (see Kämpchen 1991).

philosophical lectures that had just appeared in German translation.[8] Still under the influence of the First World War Zweig was deeply attracted by the ethics of non-violence expressed in Tagore's work, put into political practice at the same time by Mahatma Gandhi.

A little later, in 1922, the same year when Hermann Hesse wrote his *Siddhartha*, Stefan Zweig, too, wrote a long story, entitled *Die Augen des ewigen Bruders* (*The Eyes of the Eternal Brother*) which he characterized as an 'Indian legend.'[9] He used a freely invented plot in the style of an ancient Indian narration in order to deal with some of the political and ethical questions for which each human society has to find answers and which were very urgent in the 1920s in Europe. Is there a justification for war and violence (including capital punishment)? How does one exercise political power in a just and fair way? Can a society thrive when some possess land and property and others do not? And he raises a very general question: how does one act in such a way that no harm is done to anyone?

Memories of Banāras where Stefan Zweig got his most impressive exposure to Indian religious life and where he saw many people whom he described as burning with ascetic fervour were certainly in his mind when he wrote his 'Indian legend' about a man who can be called a fanatic of righteousness. Zweig presents Virata, the hero of his legend, in five episodes as a man who passionately strives to lead a pure, a flawless life.

Above the actual story Stefan Zweig quoted a few verses from the Bhagavad Gītā as a motto:

> Not by refraining from action does man attain freedom from action. For not even for a moment can a man be without action.[10]
>
> What is work? What is beyond work? Even some seers see this not aright. I will teach thee the truth of pure work, and this truth shall make thee free.
>
> Know therefore what is work, and also know what is wrong work. And know also of a work that is silence: mysterious is the path of work.[11]

First we meet Virata, a member of the *kśatriya* aristocracy, on a military campaign to quell a rebellion against the king of the country. Although the king is a harsh ruler, a merciless judge and tax collector, Virata remains absolutely loyal and defeats the army of the rebels in a surprise attack at night. In the morning he sees among the

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8 Stefan Zweig, 'Rabindranath Tagores Sadhana,' in *Das Geheimnis des künstlerischen Schaffens. Essays*. Frankfurt am Main, 1984, pp. 179–87. Originally published in *Das literarische Echo*, Berlin, 1 October 1921.

9 Zweig 1922. In 1922 Hesse and Zweig point out in their correspondence the common basis of their 'Indian' narratives. Zweig writes to Hesse on 13 December 1922: 'It is not by mere chance, that we [...] met again and again in crucial questions, [...], that both of us modified similar insights at the same hour in legends from the Indian world.' (Prater 1981: 55).

10 *The Bhagavad Gita* III, 56.

11 *The Bhagavad Gita* IV, 16–17; ibid., 62.

corpses on the battlefield his own brother who had fought for the rebels. The view of his brother's frozen eyes sinks into Virata's heart and haunts him throughout his life. When the grateful king wants to give his saviour the supreme command over his army Virata rejects the offer and declares that from now on he will never touch a sword again, 'because there is violence in the sword and violence is the enemy of justice. He who takes part in the sin of killing is a dead man himself.'[12] His sudden insight that each act of killing is fratricide transforms Virata immediately from a hawk into a dove. Now he pleads for radical non-violence, for he wants 'to live as a just one.'[13]

In each of the following episodes Virata chooses an altogether different way of life and action from the previous one and every time he gives overriding importance to his aims of non-violence and righteousness. Still, again and again he becomes responsible for the suffering of fellow human beings who seem to stare at him reproachfully with the eyes of his dead brother.

In this way the erstwhile warrior is appointed as the kingdom's supreme judge and in the second episode of the legend Virata makes himself a name as an embodiment of justice.[14] But in spite of his best intentions Virata here, too, is led to realize that according to his own high standards he has become guilty of delivering an inhuman judgement and that there is no hope of ever achieving his goal of perfect justice in his profession as a judge.

Now, in the third phase of the story, Virata leaves the King's service for good and retires to his private life, looking only after his family and his estates. He studies the Holy Scriptures, practices meditation and gives charity to the poor. He gives good advice to his neighbors when they have quarrels with each other and helps them to settle their conflicts amicably. Again he makes himself a name as a man of great practical wisdom.

This peaceful period again comes to an abrupt end when he sees one day how his sons fiercely punish a slave, because he had been a little late to start his work, and again Virata sees his brother's glance in the wide-open eyes of the tortured man. Virata tells his sons to leave the man alone to which they comply reluctantly. In the following sleepless night Virata understands that slavery is incompatible with his ideals. When he tells his sons next morning that all their slaves shall be free they do not accept their father's decision. They are afraid that without slaves they themselves would have to work in the fields, which is exactly what Virata wants them to do now. We can feel here the influence of Leo Tolstoy who tried to practice this philosophy on his country estate in Russia and who deeply influenced Mahatma Gandhi. Virata's sons now openly raise a mutiny against their father and tell him that they accept his orders no longer. Virata severs the bonds between himself and his family as he wants neither command nor rule, not even over his sons, nor does he want to subsist on the

12 Zweig 1922: 17.

13 Ibid.

14 Although he never sentences a culprit to death the kingdom's crime rate does not rise. Here Stefan Zweig clearly makes his own statement about capital punishment which was then and still is a topic of discussion.

sweat of the slaves. Following his old ideal to live free from guilt, he leaves his house, saying that only the poor person who works himself is close to God.

In the fourth phase of the 'legend' Virata builds a hut for himself in the forest and becomes a hermit. Only the animals are his companions and friends. He does observe that even Nature is full of violence. One animal kills and eats the other, but Virata remains a silent uninvolved witness. One day a man sees Virata in his forest hermitage and becomes convinced that Virata is a saint. This rumour spreads all over the villages of the area and unexpectedly Virata finds followers. A number of men give away all their possessions, leave their wives and children in order to live as hermits in the forests in the quest for an eternal truth. Once when Virata leaves his hermitage to go to the next village all the villagers greet him reverently, except one woman who stares at him with eyes filled with hatred. Again he feels as if his dead brother were looking at him. On his enquiry the woman answers that her husband had followed Virata's example. He had left her alone in poverty and her children had died of hunger. And she blames Virata for all her misery. Virata is shattered. Again he has become guilty, even though unknowingly. As before, he is immediately ready to correct himself and he criticizes himself severely: 'I meant to be a humble servant of God, but I have been proud and haughty [...] I admit: I am to blame for your sufferings [...] Even the non-doer acts and thus becomes guilty, even the secluded one lives within all his brothers.'[15]

The incident drives Virata out of his paradise. After spending one more night in the hut he leaves his friends, the birds, and returns to the city. Admitting that he failed to free himself from the web of culpable action he asks the king to accept him now as his humble servant. 'For only he who serves is free.'[16] The king feels insulted by such reasoning which challenges his own lordship. He gives Virata the humblest of all posts and Virata is grateful to become the keeper of the dogs. Now the man who earned fame in many walks of life gradually falls into oblivion. Only the dogs love the friendly old man. Virata lives many more years, he feeds and cleans the dogs, and he is happy about his humble inconspicuous life. When he dies no priest carries out the last rites for him. Only the dogs howl for a day or two, and then they, too, forget Virata.

This philosophical tale poses a number of questions. Does Stefan Zweig mean to present the end of the story as a happy one? Has Virata achieved the goal of his struggle for absolute purity? Or does Zweig intend to reduce Virata's strife for a life free from guilt to absurdity? Is it a tale about pacifism and socialism? Or does Zweig just want to give his readers food for their own personal thought about the ethical implications of violence, power, and social inequality? Unlike most other heroes of Zweig's novellas and narrations Virata is not a psychologically realistic character. The reader can hardly empathize with his quick and radical decisions. But Zweig certainly does prompt the reader to come to his own conclusions.

The story has a dialectical structure. From episode to episode the respective ethi-

15 Zweig 1922: 56.

16 Ibid., 58.

cal position is negated and converted into a new and even more radical position. It is, however, striking that Virata is only interested in his own personal freedom from guilt. When he renounces violence he does not ask if and how human social life in general could be freed from violence and military action. When he steps down from his post as a judge he does not consider the social consequences of a general abolition of criminal justice. The reformed hero retires into private life and doesn't seem to care that others are now warriors and judges.

Again, when he repudiates slavery he does so only personally without committing himself to a change in the entire social system. And again, his solitude in the forest is not so complete that he would not be in touch with human life around him at all. Others follow his example and outdo him. The woman who holds him responsible for her children's death teaches him the impossibility of complete withdrawal from human society and also the impossibility of anticipating all the consequences of his actions. All his efforts to live free from guilt are shattered. The eyes of his killed brother keep haunting him. The ultimate position to which he can fall back is to act without a will of his own, to be a servant carrying out his master's will.

Was it Zweig's intention to show that radical renunciation of personal ambition, even of the ambition to be a holy man, leads to supreme wisdom, freedom, and happiness? Such a notion can, in fact, be found in Indian thought. But is a servant discharged from the responsibility for his actions and omissions? He may very well be at peace with himself, but he too is not immune from becoming guilty. Stefan Zweig rather shows how a man fails to achieve this goal, and it seems impossible to achieve it at all.[17]

Although Zweig's 'Indian legend' begins with a quotation from the Bhagavad Gītā, there is no examination of the Gītā's own answer to the questions of violence and right action. Virata and Arjuna find themselves in a similar dilemma but they choose very different paths of action. Arjuna, like Virata, is ready to renounce violence in order to avoid the sin of fratricide, but he is led to a different solution: to fight for a righteous cause without hatred, without personal ambition, knowing about the wider context of all human life and action.

The Gītā's doctrine of *Karma Yoga* – of acting without desire for the fruits of

17 Lionel B. Steinman comes to the same conclusion:

> The total experience of Virata, if not his final decision, implies a rejection of any quietist solution; but the pitiable peace he gains through spending the remains of his life as a keeper of the king's dogs is not a solution to life's complexity but a denial of its ethical and social dimensions. Indeed, given the terms of Zweig's legend, it is likely that Virata would have continued to encounter, even as a kennel keeper, ethical dilemmas essentially the same as those he was attempting to escape. That Zweig chose such utter self-abnegation in (purportedly) unconditional service indicates his failure to define an operational relationship between individual and social ethics, between ethical values and ethical action, but not a renunciation of them in favor of some Eastern quietism [...] Virata was Zweig's confession that life means service and that purely egotistical action is devoid of sense. He never succeeded in developing this ideal into a guide to ethical action. (Steinman 1981: 160f.)

one's actions – could have been the practical answer to Virata's constant search for a life without guilt and entanglement. More important than action itself is the inner attitude of the person who acts. If he acts in a spirit of service and sacrifice he remains free from the binding effects of his doings. Even without ascetic renunciation such a way of life leads to inner freedom. And such an attitude could have given Stefan Zweig himself courage to live and carry on his work in the oppressive times of his exile.

Zweig's interest in India and Indian thought was nourished by the ethical problems which absorbed him throughout his life. In his 'Indian legend' *The Eyes of the Eternal Brother* he deals seriously with questions raised in Europe by Tolstoy and Romain Rolland, and in India by Gandhi. India at the time of her non-violent struggle for independence was for him a possible source of answers to the urgent questions of social ethics. The lasting value of his legend lies in the trenchant presentation of these problems, not in their solution.

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Josef Winkler's background is altogether different from Stefan Zweig's. Winkler was born in 1953 in a tiny village in a very conservative rural area of southern Austria where he grew up on a farm. Much of Winkler's writing deals with his childhood experiences in this environment that seems to have been a hell for him. A traumatic experience was the common suicide of two teenage boys in his village who had been exposed as homosexuals. The topics of death and homosexuality play an important role in many of his writings.

As a boy who was keen to read books, Winkler was an outsider in his village. At the age of 14 he left the village to continue his education in a commercial school. From the age of 17 onwards he worked in various office jobs during the daytime and attended an evening school. Since 1979 he has been a freelance writer. In the beginning his writings were set in the patriarchal and catholic environment of his childhood. Later on he made extensive journeys to Italy, India, and Japan, which resulted in travelogues and novels set in these countries.

In a conversation with Winkler the Austrian professor of literary studies Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler who knew about Winkler's overwhelming interest in death advised him to travel to Banāras, which he knew to be the *Mahāśmaśān* or 'Great Cremation Ground.' This stimulus along with the fact that Winkler's wife had spent four years of her childhood in Rourkela prompted them to travel together to India in the mid-1990s with two extended stays at Banāras. The result of these sojourns is the book *Domra. Am Ufer des Ganges*[18] (*Domra. On the Banks of the Ganges*), labelled as a novel. To me this is a misleading description, as it is not a fictional work. It is rather a diary-cum-travelogue about the city of Vārāṇasī, and more specifically about its Hariścandra Ghāṭ, one of the two places at the river front where cremations

18 Winkler 1996.

according to Hindu rites take place every day. Most of its 283 pages are filled with minute descriptions of everything that happens day-by-day on the cremation ghāṭ: the preparations for and the process of cremation itself and everything that takes place just next to it: children playing, people bathing, animals basking in the sun, and so on. The book is enriched by black and white photographs – depicting scenes on the Gaṅgā ghāṭs – by Winkler's wife, Christina Schwichtenberg.

In the beginning Winkler writes about one of his first days in Banāras. While his wife was happily enjoying some sweets she had just bought and which brought back to her the tastes of her childhood, Winkler was shocked and overwhelmed by the multitude of new, mostly repulsive or threatening impressions which he could neither understand nor digest. Back in their hotel this heavy cultural shock resulted in an uncontrollable emotional upsurge and a flood of tears.

Winkler took it upon himself to spend a few hours a day for several months at the Hariścandra Ghāṭ and to note down what he saw. As he said later in an interview he was fascinated by the contrast between the rituals of death and cremation and the sprawling life that unfolded itself at the same time just next to the funeral pyres.[19] These observations amount to more than three-quarters of the book. Many such passages cover four to eight pages without any segmentation into paragraphs. Typical of his style is also an abundance of descriptive adjectives. Here are a few sentences in the beginning of such a chapter:

> When the sun had disappeared behind the houses of Varanasi and the half moon stood clearly visible at the bluish pink sky and was reflected in the lead-coloured water of the Ganges which was overlaid with a pink gleam, I sat down next to a sleeping meagre white and brown spotted bitch on the large round cremation altar stone in the middle of Hariścandra Ghāṭ where there were still lying white and grey ashes, small pieces of coal and the porous, brittle, white burnt down remains of the bones of a young deceased woman who had been cremated this morning with unveiled face. The rosy teats of the sleeping heavily gasping bitch touched the white grey ashes, the black pieces of charcoal and the porous, brittle, charred bone-particles of the dead woman. Below me a bald-headed man, dressed only in a seamless white cotton cloth, hit again and again with a green bamboo stick on the lower body and the legs of a burning corpse.[20]

The writer does not explain what he sees; he does not comment on it; he does not speak about his own feelings or reactions. He just observes and seems determined not to leave out even the minutest detail, be it each and every step of the gradual (and sometimes incomplete) transformation of a human body into a heap of ash, be it the efforts of the *ḍom* (cremation assistant) to keep the fire burning, be it the children playing nearby or bathing in the river, be it the tourists passing by on a boat. How everybody is dressed, how he or she looks, the style or absence of their hair, the dogs

19 Interview with M. Prangel, 'Deutsche Bücher,' *Forum für Literatur*, 33 (2003) Vol. 4, pp. 257–76; also published on http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez_id=6730.

20 Winkler 1996: 84.

sleeping on the ghāṭ or licking their genitals, etc. – everything seems equally significant. The narrator's special attention is, however, repeatedly attracted by young boys, 'good-looking lads,' who take their bath in the Ganges, covered only by wet loincloths. Basically, the scenes on the cremation ghāṭ are the same every day. So, naturally, their descriptions repeat themselves with some variation.

Hariścandra Ghāṭ, one of the two cremation ghāṭs in Banāras and the site described by Josef Winkler in his *Domra*

In addition to the episodes on the cremation ghāṭ Winkler describes the street life at Lanka market, on the main road from Assī to Godaulia or somewhere else in the lanes of the city. Here, too, the style is the same: detailed descriptions without comment. It is, however, remarkable that almost everything he observes is ugly and repulsive, at least to common taste: how chickens are slaughtered and their intestines are taken out, how a puppy gets run over and killed by a scooter, how vultures take care of the puppy's remains, and many more such instances could be given. No doubt, such scenes can be observed in daily life on the streets of Banāras, but the narrator seems to be blind to attractive and aesthetic sights which can also be seen. In the interview already mentioned Winkler says that the common notions of beauty and ugliness don't count for him. What most people find ugly is beautiful for him. So, the seemingly objective uncommented description of sights has been filtered – consciously or unconsciously – through a subjective awareness.[21]

21 This style of writing has been described as 'monomaniacal circumscription,' characterized

There are a few shorter passages in the book where we see the author resting in his hotel after the day's session on the cremation ghāṭ is over. Here he sometimes tells something about himself, he shares childhood memories that surge up and fill his dreams. The teenage boys who committed suicide in his native village, an always-hungry old farm maid whom he seems to have despised – they keep haunting him, even in his hotel room at Assī Ghāṭ.

To spend so much time at a cremation site is not a small undertaking. It must have needed a strong motivation, tremendous patience, and determination on the part of the author. One is even reminded of certain *sādhu*s who live and practice austerities on the cremation grounds although their motives are probably different from Winkler's. The author, however, does not disclose his reasons. Was it a meditative exercise in pure witnessing without the involvement of the judging mind? Did he want to arrive at a deeper understanding of the mystery of death? Did he undertake the journey and write the book in an attempt to heal his childhood traumas? Whether such deeper insight or a healing effect has been achieved cannot be assessed from the book.

Winkler has made use of at least one scholarly source of information about the traditions of Banāras, the German edition of Diana Eck's book *Banaras. City of Light*,[22] a work he quotes several times. Such informative insertions may have led the Austrian critic Sigrid Löffler to suggest that Winkler, however unsuccessfully, was attempting to present an ethno-poetic study of the life of the cremator caste of Vārāṇasī.[23]

In another book Winkler admits that it was 'necrophilic curiosity' which brought him to Banāras (Winkler 2007: 143). And in the interview with Matthias Prangel he declares:

> It was always clear to me [...] that I must write what is really within me, that I have to be shameless, that I have to be assailable [...] I have never had any censorship in my head and when I wrote I have never looked anybody over his shoulder; I have never imagined what people might think about it. I was never interested in this. To me only the precision and the beauty of the language mattered.

Winkler's descriptions are, indeed, very precise and detailed, and sometimes his language has a poetic quality. On the whole, however, his sentences are, to my taste, too long and too heavily loaded with adjectives and participial constructions.

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by radical subjectivity, plain depiction of certain events and alteration of the same events through the inner eye of the witness (Engelmeier 2011: 67f.).

22 Eck 1983; published in German as *Banaras. Stadt des Lichts*. Frankfurt am Main, 1989.

23 'Winkler enters ethno-poetic territory without being equipped for that in the least. Without trying to comprehend the religious premises of Hindu death rituals and to include the spiritual dimension into the narrative the observations on the banks of the Ganges in their false directness must remain trivial, intrusive or voyeuristic. In Josef Winkler's case they are all this at the same time.' (Sigrid Löffler, 'Fremder Zuschauer vor Scheiterhaufen. Josef Winkler als Buchführer am Ganges,' *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich), 12/13 October 1996.)

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Whereas Zweig's books were highly appreciated by millions of readers in many languages Winkler has not had such a widespread impact. Still, he is a very successful writer. Since 1979 he has been awarded at least thirteen Austrian and German literary prizes, some very prestigious among them. The boldness, radicalism, the lack of self-censorship in Winkler's detailed descriptions has impressed the prize-awarding juries.

Summarizing the portraits of these two authors and their India-related writings I find it enriching and enjoyable to read Stefan Zweig's 'legend.' As a reader one feels respected by the author. In his article about Banāras Zweig communicates his own views and feelings in a comprehensible way. And in *The Eyes of the Eternal Brother* he takes his readers as thinking beings into a serious intellectual discourse about ethical questions.

A point in favor of Winkler's *Domra* is that while forcing the reader to look at death and decay the book takes him (or her) to see the close proximity of life and death as an indivisible totality. But in spite of Winkler's detailed quasi-objective description of sights and events in Banāras, *Domra* is not a communicative book. The reader remains puzzled by the scenes and rituals described and the author seems to remain locked up in his own inner world.

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Academic Pilgrimages: What I learnt on studying Banāras

Nita Kumar

After ten years of research in Banāras, from 1981 to 1990, I found myself, together with my husband, having set up an organisation, NIRMAN, and a school, Southpoint Vidyashram. I also found myself transformed in my methodological perspectives, my philosophy of life, and my ideology of public work. I questioned more, I had more answers, and then again more questions. For the rash, ecumenical decision to set up a school, and the changes that coloured the rest of my life, I blame only Banāras. What is it about Banāras that influenced me in this dramatic way?

Turning over all the complex things that have taken place during the thirty two years of my pilgrimage to Banāras, I feel that I can best sort out the fruits of that pilgrimage as lessons I have learnt that I call 'Anger,' 'Pain,' and 'Imagination and Love.'

Anger

My long-time informant Tara Prasad was a carver of wooden figures. He would sit on his haunches in a quiet corridor that opened on one side to the courtyard of his home where his wife worked and his daughter played, and on the other side to the lane of his neighbourhood, where an acquaintance occasionally passed. He would look up and speak, and quickly look down again to continue chiselling. He wore a white *dhoti* and *kurta*, and when he was done with work he washed up and changed to a fresh set of dhoti-kurta. Then, as if on a holiday, he strolled out to visit people and places. He always walked. He was at home in the city. Of course he had his flaws like the rest of us, but I found him impressive and likeable because he was so articulate about his philosophy, and so full of humour and irony. His professional and social life was rich and rewarding. He was illiterate and had never been to school. He was dirt-poor.

Another long-time informant, Markande, was a carver of stone boxes and candle stands. He worked in a room with lathe machines that produced a fine white dust. Half a dozen other young men worked with him, all dressed in brief *lungī*s, all coated with fine white dust. When he was done with work, he bathed, dressed carefully in fresh pants and shirt, and went visiting, to look at and watch things, to talk and to listen to music. He was extremely proud of his artistry. He considered himself one of the best kinds of people there could be, intelligent, smart, articulate, creative, and appreciative of the world's beauty. He was somewhat literate, having attended school

for two or three years before dropping out. Once, asked to read a newspaper, he surprised himself and those around him, by reading it comfortably. He was so poor that he and his family often went without meals.

I write about them in the past tense because I did my first round of research with them in 1981–83. Tara Prasad died long ago and his grandson is now a young adult. Markande is no longer a stone carver and, many jobs later, is now retired, almost a *sādhu*. His son is older than he was then and his other three children are also almost adults.

A third informant who I have known for a shorter time than these two and who is still in my life is Wasim Akhtar. He is the much younger brother-in-law of my favourite informant, Shaukat Majid, a sari designer and poet. The men of this family are all weavers. The women prepare the warp, weft, and bobbins, and trim the *zari* or gold and silver thread from the wrong side of saris to make them ready for sale when finished. If they know how to, they do *zardozi* or embroidering, a craft independent of weaving. The men work in little manufactories with four or more pit looms and jacquard machines. They wear only *lungī*s and listen to radios. The women work singly or in pairs on stretched out frames with fabric and bend over with their needles and coloured threads and spangles. Both work at home and get up as they like to attend to whatever they have to do at home, or to talk to a visitor or family member. They are all unschooled, but have all spent about two years each learning to read the Qur'an.

This encounter with the artisans of Banāras taught me a lot. Because of who I was, an educated middle-class Indian, I had not gone to Banāras thinking, 'This is a mysterious, exotic place that I am an outsider to.' Outsider I *was*, but in ways I had never expected. As an Indian, I had assumed I belonged in India and was always a part of India, one with other Indians. Banāras taught me about difference.

There is a discourse of education and of children in India that may be accurately described as 'modernist.' This discourse assumes that formal education, measured by literacy and success in state-regulated schools, is of central importance. Children who do not get this education are 'failed' or 'backward.'[1] Adults who do not have it are a huge problem, and are never spoken of positively. Government and private reports, such as the 'Public Report on Basic Education in India' (PROBE 1999), or the 'Annual Survey of Education Report' (ASER), document the various failures of formal education in India. However, this discourse of the superiority of formally educated adults and children is not shared by everyone in India. It is not shared by artisans, for instance, and because artisans have a high evaluation of their own identities, it may accurately be called an anti-artisan discourse.

When working in Banāras I understood that I shared the premises of modernity, and believed in the assumptions of 1950, that the people of India constitute for themselves a sovereign, democratic, secular republic, with equal access to education for everyone. This faith in the Constitution, together with my research on the artisans

1 'Backward' is a legal term in India. 'Left behind' is a legal term in the USA.

of Banāras, troubled me by the questions it raised. Why are some people considered stupid and even incapable of learning, and others considered to be just what the Constitution ordered? Why is there such a big gap between 'knowledge' as spouted by schooled people and 'knowledge' that is the province of the artisan, between the 'learning' acquired from a textbook and the 'learning' acquired elsewhere ? Who has given the definers of the correct 'knowledge' and 'learning' their power? Why are uneducated people typically poor? Why are they, Tara, Markande, Waseem, happy in their illiteracy? Or are they deceiving us that they are?

My colleague, friend and husband, Som Majumdar, and I, tried to answer the questions with some practical action. We took the predictable steps taken by the nationalists of the nineteenth-twentieth centuries in India – we started a school. Unlike them, I like to think, we did not precisely want 'to build up the nation.' But like them, we were angry with the inequality our informant-friends were subjected to, and the prospect of this continuing to future generations. The solution seemed to lie in schooling. So, if we could educate them, we must.

There is another part to the question, however. While most artisans were left out in the cold by the discourse of modernity, some did subscribe to it. When they said, 'All right, our profession is backward. We will agree to be schooled and move on,' they were unable to move – after years in which the child gave all her time to school instead of, as before, learning her family craft.

When I met those of my old informants' descendants recently whom I had not been in touch with, I was left extremely sad and angry, albeit confirmed in a hypothesis. Ramesh, the son of my good friend Mohan Lal, of *kasera*, or metalworker caste, roundly blames contemporary schooling for their plight. He himself 'studied and studied,' and 'schooled and schooled' his children (as he and his brothers put it), but 'nothing happened.' They could not qualify for any job or competitive examination. '*Bahut* form *bhare* (We filled out many forms,)' meaning that they kept trying for various openings, and got nowhere. Similarly, Markande's two older children studied in private schools and are still blue collar workers like him. Waseem Akhtar's older daughter studied in a private school somewhere and could not fulfil her dream of working. What they shared is the same dream and disappointment as millions of Indians, that schooling is supposed to produce professional and social mobility, but actually does not. It leaves the young person *less* educated than before.

I cannot say this emphatically enough. Today, Markande's two younger daughters go to the school we set up in 1990. One is about to graduate and go on for higher studies. She wants to be a teacher and it is certain that she can be one. Waseem Akhtar's younger son and daughter are about to graduate from our school. They are smart and confident and excellent learners and can choose to study towards almost any profession they like. Tara Prasad's grandson studied elsewhere, in a combination of private and government schools, and could not get a job. He continues in his father's working class job.

This is a more complicated story than simply one of 'artisans have been constituted by modernity as backward and we have to change that.' Yes, they have been so

constituted. But many of them do want mobility. For those who do not, there should be a better place for them in modernity. For those who do, schools should deliver on the promise made by them. I want to emphasise that this is not of the level of 'a good idea.' It is for the *survival* of thousands and millions of citizens. In Banāras, I was brought to tears to see friends malnourished and old before their times, only because they had trusted the promise of schooling and it had failed them. Some crises arouse us to anger because of the ineptness that produces them. Our discourse of modernity and our poor delivery of it is such a crisis. It was very evident in Banāras and taught me anger.

Pain

So I got interested in schools. In 1986 I began a historical and ethnographic project on education in Banāras, and in my ethnographic research on schools, I observed in hundreds of classrooms. There was typically a singular absence of humour and imagination in all of them. It was if teachers were both untrained professionally to think of children as their 'clients,' and had *also* forgotten their own human experiences of what children were and how children's minds worked. We had the worst of two worlds: a modern one with modern-style school systems that did not deliver because the premises of modernity were alarmingly absent, such as individual rights, professional ethics, and systemic management. And a pre-modern one with intimate spaces, flexible rules, fluid disciplining, but which in fact was now without its teeth, seen as backward.

An instance that comes to mind is one in a Kindergarten classroom in Tulsi Vidya Niketan. The subject was 'G. K.,' that is, General Knowledge. The topic of the day was 'India.' The teacher was going through questions and answers, asking the question, giving the answer, and having the students chorus the question and answer repeatedly after her.

Having asked about the main rivers of India and other topics in Geography, she came to the festivals of India. One of the 'festivals' is apparently Children's Day, celebrated on 16th November. The question was 'When is Children's Day?' The answer was 'Children's Day is on 16th November.' It seemed simple enough, and the children already had previous practice with a dozen similar questions. I sat at the back of the class, as always, taking notes. It was afternoon. The children sat in rows on uncomfortable benches facing the teacher. She spoke more vivaciously than usual, my experience told me, because of the presence of a visitor. Yet, her teaching strategy could not be more ineffective. Children like to chorus. So they had been giving resounding answers so far. The activity was wearing thin, however. The children shifted in their seats and gave ample signals of their patience reaching its end. I stifled a yawn.

Suddenly the class came to life. In answer to 'When is Children's Day?' the students obediently chorused, 'Children's Day is 16th November.' Except for one voice. It said '16th *Novembers*.' The teacher paused. 'Who said that?' No one answered. She corrected the mistake and asked the question again. Again a voice said, '16th *Novembers*.' '*Who said that?*' she said, a sharp edge to her voice.

Every time the teacher corrected the mistake and led the question and answer chorus, one little voice hissed '16th *Novembers*.' If a child had been confused in the beginning about the random deployment of 's' in English (as, for instance in 'Children's'), that child had moved from confusion to a deliberate conspiracy against the teacher. Each time the answer included the rogue 's' the teacher was driven to further annoyance. Soon, she approached a level of frenzy. She threatened her class out of all proportion to the misdemeanour. '*Agar kisi ke bhī muṅh se yah śabd sunā, to maiṅ mar ke bahar kar dūṅgī* (If I hear this sound from anyone's mouth, I will beat them and throw them out of the class).' Obviously, she could not keep to her threat. She got more and more furious, and the child was never discovered. It is fair to say that as the period ended, I felt that the child-victor had vanquished the opponent, the teacher, who was lying in a helpless heap on the floor brought to defeat by her own short-sightedness in beginning the tournament at all.

It might seem that such data merely confirms a trivial fact we all know anyway: that Indian teachers have a (painfully) poor sense of what children are; that they are routinely unfriendly to children; that they have weak procedures of teaching; and are humourless and unimaginative. But, *because* I was in Banāras classrooms while all this was happening, the problem was not trivial, but immense, and chronic. The question became: *what would it take to reform the poor technical base and the poor motivation of the teachers? What were their undiscovered strengths and skills to nurture?*

It was a question of prepossessing intellectual challenge, resting necessarily on a holistic understanding of teachers. The question is not simply the technical one of what formal procedures, structures, and disciplinary rules are lacking and need to be put in place. The problem is not simply 'poor teaching.' What we have here is a problem that is historical, cultural, sociological, political, and discursive. The scene sketched by me above is a microcosm that shows us that not only has the teacher failed, but the society, the nation state, and the discourse of modernity have all shown a pathetic inadequacy. What has succeeded is the intelligence of the child and his or her spirit of rebellion that asserts that even if the adults and their system are stupid and boring, reducing themselves (the adults) to anger, *she*, the child, will not give into it so easily.

We may pause here to ask, does not the child revolt always, everywhere? Are not adults unimaginative and humourless always? There are brilliant pictures of the experience of the child in an insensitive adult world, in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, in R.K. Narain's *Swami and Friends*, in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office,* and in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. And of course there are thousands of children's stories from the child's point of view. Reading any of these, we may feel resigned to the presence of two worlds, the child's and the adult's, destined to remain distant from each other, the child's represented, at best, only by great poets and authors. But, for better or for worse, thanks to the power of ethnography that brought home the pain of the child to me, the rich fiction on the subject, and – may I say – the child in me, I was not thus resigned. From 1986 onwards I took on as an intellectual,

and also a technical and political challenge, understanding and then fighting against the pain of children in the world adults had created for them.

I also took on the challenge of a new creative anthropology through mulling over my emotions during the research process. I have done some three research projects so far in my professional career as a historian and anthropologist. The first was on the 'Work and leisure worlds of artisan men in Banāras.' The second was on the ''No-work' and 'no-leisure' world of the 'not-artisan' women in Banāras.' The third was on education in Banāras and in India. I became extremely uncomfortable when the pattern that revealed itself.

The pattern was this. In spite of the negative sound of the second topic, "'no-work' and 'no-leisure' of 'not-artisan' women," both the first two topics on artisan men and 'non-artisan' women revealed to me worlds of untold riches. Even though in both cases the people were very poor and insecure, they were rich in manifold ways, from philosophy to humour. Schools and schooling, as my third project revealed, were hugely impoverished by contrast. They had little philosophy that thrilled, and humour only in the sense of painful humour and sarcasm. The first fifteen years of my historical-anthropological practice made me a happy, excited person, not unlike a person in love. I had all the symptoms similar to those of other anthropologists besotted with "their" people, full of thoughts of them, genuinely fond of them and with a high regard for their qualities, anxious to have more intimate contact with them, jealous of others trespassing into their territory. I loved my artisans. I loved their women who apparently had no work or leisure. I loved the daily routines of everyday life in Banāras.

The twenty five years of my next project on education produced novel responses in me. I was unhappy at the data I uncovered, disliked rather than loved what I got to know, and with time grew to have progressively *less* regard for the qualities of my educator informants. I hated the schools I studied. I distrusted the educators I talked to. I began to despise the daily routines of schooling in Banāras and in all other places in India with very rare exceptions. Instead of the usual anthropological and historical approach of respecting the 'culture' you study and professing humility before its riches, I found that in all honesty I would have to adopt the approach of condemning the 'culture' of schools I was studying and to make, however humbly, the claim that my informants lacked certain insights that seemed to me self-evident, and despite a lack of experience in education, that occurred to me regularly. I was getting ready to plunge into this 'culture' in a very serious way by *becoming* one of the very educators of Banāras such as I was studying. This was a risky and troubling step to take that sometimes gave me nightmares, and always made me feel uncertain and on my defensive.

I understand now that it had nothing to do with me and everything to do with the subject of my research. I think that everyday life and work and leisure patterns of people like artisans are *in fact* structured and philosophically informed, and therefore, so to speak, 'beautiful' and 'rich,' 'real' and 'authentic,' not in the sense of unchanging or adhering to some textual model, but in the sense of being exemplars of

people's agency and action. They are of course far from perfect in a political sense, being rife with family and community-based gender, age, and class inequalities and abuses.

Who should I contrast them to in my education research? My informants in education were, in turn, teachers, students, and administrators. They were often in direct or indirect opposition to each other in terms of their interests. What was good for one was bad for the other and vice versa. I would like to claim that my primary informants were the students. If I took the point of view of the students I felt strongly that the school culture I was studying was horrible. It was not intelligent or well planned, and was superficial, manipulative, and painful.

Apart from the shortcomings of teachers, there were two other areas of enquiry that called to me by virtue of their obvious centrality. One was space. Schools in Banāras were called by euphemistic names such as 'Oxford' or 'Cambridge.' They chose to have an English name such as 'Sunny Valley' or 'Moonbeam' or the words 'Saint' or 'Convent.' They professed to have 'CBSE' (Central Board of Secondary Education) recognition or to use 'playway methods.' In reality, they were schools set up by people of little knowledge or experience about children, often in residential buildings with no resources such as playgrounds, library, or teaching materials. The physical spaces were unfriendly and often unsuitable. The claims made were hypocritical and false. The spaces could be excused if the teaching methods had been imaginative. But the combination of blatantly inappropriate spaces plus poor teaching methods was inexcusable.

The third problem area was the curriculum. I understood it finally as 'the school-home divide.' From language, to the use of space and body language, to the very ideas and concepts taught, the curriculum was degrading to the home culture of children. At best it was indifferent and distanced. Formal schooling taught children that they had to become new people who were different to, and looked down upon, their families. Had I not first known the families, I would have perhaps been misled by the monolithic system called formal education and not realised the size of the problem. The problem is not merely one of discourse and power, as to how education despises the non-educated. It is one of content. Our curriculum in schools is so much poorer for distancing itself from the family. The vast resources of techniques, narratives, symbols, systems that exist in children's home lives are not imaginatively used by educators. Their teaching is weaker than it needs to be *and* children do not learn to think of themselves as members, and hopefully, leaders of society.

Imagination

Vārāṇasī is a small city in Northern India. Vārāṇasī is *small* only by today's standards, being without major industry, and only slowly being "developed" with a flyover or two and high-rise apartment buildings – and cafes. In the past it has been understood as *big* by virtue of its sheer importance. It has been the centre of Hinduism and one of the most important pilgrimage sites on the subcontinent. I have used it as a

case of modernity in India, arguing that while it has a distinct history and identity, it is also representative of small-town Indian life.

There is a genre of 'praise literature' called *māhātmya* that tells us about the centrality of Banāras/Kāśī/Vārāṇasī for the Hindu pilgrim. But there is also a secondary literature in History, Sociology, Religious Studies, Anthropology, and Ethnomusicology that tells us about the importance of Vārāṇasī for all kinds of production, service, and consumption, including in education. These studies make a strong connection between the economic prosperity, political stability, urban munificence, and intellectual growth of the city. They document that in late Vedic times, Banāras was a flourishing kingdom with a high level of education and intellectual-cultural transmission. In Buddhist times, it was a Vedic seat of learning that Gautam Buddha preached in. Then it became a place of Buddhist learning through his activities at Sarnath. In the following two millennia, the fortunes of Vārāṇasī went up and down with political processes and commercial activities. The trading centre of a fertile and productive hinterland, Vārāṇasī grew into a cosmopolitan city proud of its merchants, bankers, manufacturers and traders who migrated there from all parts of South Asia. They developed a composite culture called by the epithet 'Banārasi.' Part of its ethos was to spend as liberally as one earned, to revel in eccentricity (*akharpan*), to be full of a *joi de vivre* (*mauj* and *masti*). A businessman or aristocrat's worth was reflected in his patronage of teachers, students, scholars, priests, wrestlers, musicians, and poets.

The long-term 'success' of Vārāṇasī may be largely measured by the fact of its economic and commercial stability in the colonial period. While artisans in Bengal lost their market and their livelihood, landed people lost their land and perhaps their wits, and scholars and teachers were suddenly players in a tragedy where there was no more respect for their learning, Banāras' was a story of stability and even prosperity. Banāras had its crafts manufacture, its trading and banking, its ritual and hospitality services. More wealth flowed in as old aristocrats came to live there on finding colonial rule impinging on their privileges elsewhere. One gilded a temple dome, another endowed a library. One started a scholarship for needy students, another built a hostel. Banāras came to be full of parks, monasteries, hostels, endowed institutions, trusts, Sanskrit schools, Vedic schools, and campuses where many teaching and learning activities go on. Outside these places, merchants still conducted their commerce in old ways and trained their sons to do likewise. Musicians and dancers passed on their specialisations. Ritualists protected their lore by teaching select students.

Banāras' is a case study of economic processes producing strong cultural systems, yet not every part of the cultural systems, if any at all, can be explained by simply the economics. I wrote a piece on the Gaṅgā at Banāras, in the doing of which I had to acknowledge afresh that we were looking at a marvellous feat of the imagination. To conceptualise a river, however benign, as a goddess that was then sung to, danced out, eulogised, and adored, was a feat of the imagination that deserved respect. The particular philosophy of balance that made it possible to have both strong commerce and an imaginative cultural system was doubly impressive.

I came to understand myself better as I came to understand Banāras. Via these two, I came to understand the modernity of India. I was working on the intellectual history of India and struggling to define the nature of the new educated Indian person. Taking myself as a case, I asked, 'What gives me this appreciation for our mythology and epics? Why do I love Indian music and dance? Why is there a continuity for me of the past into the present? None of these things, after all, were part of my curriculum of study. My schools, on the contrary, were adamant that they must form me into a new image through their syllabus of studies.'

I realised that just as Banāras is a lived-in culture that surrounds you and plays itself out, so is India altogether. Growing up in small towns, I had witnessed late-night performances and imbibed their narratives. I had hobnobbed with ordinary people and bridged the gap between the western educated and the masses. I took completely for granted living-in-the-present, 'irrationality,' 'superstition' and mythology. I had understood myself to be a through-and-through product of my formal education, but living in Banāras revealed to me that my imagination was intact.

My grand approach to Indian education was formed, therefore, in Banāras. This approach states that education in modern India is not a singular education, located in the school and college, but has historically been a *plural* education, located partially at home and the neighbourhood/street/city, and in the mother tongue, and therefore located in all the narratives available in these two spatial and linguistic locations. A modern educated Indian person has a comfortable plural identity and has had that for the last 150 years. That this is possible, and indeed enriching and empowering, was the lesson I learnt from Banāras. In the earlier sections I have emphasized difference. This split or difference between the formally educated and the informally educated that I witnessed on the ground, and experienced within myself, had a positive twist. It was also a *plurality* that had historically been empowering and could be made empowering again if applied to education.

My research had already shown that the people considered 'backward' and 'uneducated' were not 'uneducated' at all, but were quite impressively 'educated': they could calculate orally, they knew local histories and folk science, and they had structure in their lives based on complex epistemologies and ontologies. Because educators do not acknowledge this, the burden of backwardness becomes unrealistically increased until it becomes a huge obstacle in the otherwise possible schooling of uneducated people. The discourse of backwardness in South Asia is so overbearing that it has crucial bearing on people's immediate ability to perform, and warps government and activists' ability to think carefully about structural problems.

There is also an element of *resistance* to the state and NGO discourse by the so-called 'backward.' There is enough pleasure in life for people in the provinces, in small towns and villages, to philosophise that they are well off, that cities like Delhi or Mumbai are horrible, that lifestyles of the rich and famous are over-stressful, that they cannot imagine a life without the everyday freedoms and pleasures they have. These might include the most trivial and mundane activities, such as hanging around with friends drinking tea or chewing pan, sitting or strolling by the riverside, eating

fresh home-cooked meals, daily routines and regimes, networks of friends, an overall experience of freedom from office schedules, factory bells, and external control. When we list the pleasures, they seem trivial or mundane only *within* our discourse of progress and backwardness. This very discourse that is supposed to resolve the problem, makes it difficult for us to assess the problem.

Most anthropological literature correctly emphasises, not the love of freedom, but the structure and discipline in people's oral and indigenous knowledge. Rather than being unstructured, the problem with old-fashioned life was that it was *over-codified*, if anything. Each kind of work, each particular life role, has its codes of conduct. Then, more formal training in any knowledge or art is full of rules. Learning the Vedas is perhaps the most structured, learning Sanskrit in general, learning music or dance follows closely, learning a craft or skill comes close after. But all this is stood on its head in the discourse of modernity. Let us look briefly at one familiar discipline of modernity, that of space.

In modernity, space should be specialised and set up with many objects (excepting for the Japanese). A madrasa classroom today is largely organised in an 'Indian' way. It has a mat on the floor, a white sheet, a low floor desk for the teacher and maybe a bolster pillow. Students take off their shoes at the door and sit cross-legged on the sheet. A modern classroom by contrast *must* have desks and chairs, one to each student. It should preferably have things on the wall and things in the cupboard. Everyone keeps shoes on and has a whole attire of a uniform. It is not that this is not justified. It is that because it is considered normative, the other set up becomes *backward*. The two could be seen as two cultural systems each with its rationality. In the history of India, they are not *merely* two cultural systems, however. The modern one dominates over the other. For us, as reflexive moderns who wish to prevail in the interests of people, the domination itself creates a problem. Some cannot give up their preferred system, some will not.

It should be possible to accept that the modern one should not dominate both because it is technically not the best system, and because of the politics of domination. We should develop a third way out of the two dichotomies that have emerged historically, and have the confidence to accept many indigenous practices that presently have the image of backwardness. Among these are sitting on the floor (in modern terms, good for the body) and having few artifacts around in space (in modern terms, good for the environment.)

In short, there has been for a century and a half a plural education for the upper classes in India which has successfully made them both 'traditional' and 'modern.' This plurality was produced by education separately conducted in the home and the school. Lower classes did not experience this because they were mostly unschooled. But today, when they are ready for schooling, it is possible to adapt this model. By bridging the family-school divide and rowing together, we would find a plausible education that actually did justice to our children.

Love

However, are there are not some divides that cannot be bridged and new techniques needed for those? To continue our historical narrative, as colonialism flourished in South Asia, the picture gradually changed in Banāras. The number of universities and colleges grew, and the numbers of those converted to its values increased. Many who had been convinced earlier that they could continue on their familiar paths forever, recognised that the state's support was crucial. The economic, administrative, legal and educational changes affecting the whole country did have a crucial effect on them as well. They could not keep aloof from the change because the very structure they existed within was changing or had changed. We can look at one example.

The Agrawal Mahajani Pathshala (the Accounting School of the Agrawal merchants) taught its old curriculum well into the 1930s. This was a curriculum with its own language and mathematics, and style of teaching. It taught no English and had no truck with colonial education. However, first they had to set up a school building because that was the definition of 'school' now. They had to have a fixed curricula, examinations and salaried teachers because those were all part of the definition of a 'school' now. Finally, they had to have English as part of their curriculum. In this case, it was popular demand. They would simply have been left with no students had they not made this change. The management acted weakly for some time, but figured out what they needed to do to run the school.

Sometime over the last fifty years or so, the inbred resilience in Banāras that oriented the city to commercial, intellectual and artistic success, got broken. The conundrum that has emerged is the following, and I again claim that the story of Banāras, for all its peculiarities, is the story of all of India.

We in India want education for all and we want *modern* education. The history of modernity in India has produced a comfort with certain trappings of modernity, such as capitalism and consumerism, information technology and global commerce. It has not revealed, yet, to Indians the inevitability of the *discipline* of modernity. The same people who want modern education, and some other nice modern things, are not prepared to voluntarily give up certain values and practices. I have an example from NIRMAN.

In my organisation, staff members are late everyday and believe that, because they are loyal, hardworking and *nice* people who have never knowingly hurt anyone and so on, the staff manager and I, the director, will overlook their lateness and not penalise them. Some of these people have been working with us for ten years and have been reprimanded again and again in individual and group meetings. But they still get late. What is going wrong? How may it be corrected?

What is going wrong is that we in this particular organisation, have not decided yet on what we want. We like the innocence of the people who ask personally, politely, humbly, for their lateness to be overlooked. We think, 'She simply did not understand.' The naiveté of her position is surprising, but also charming. Being from the same society, we understand her in unstated ways. We know her home situation, her family setup, her constraints. She may even elaborate on her wrong doing herself

and tell us, 'We have had no water in our neighbourhood for three days. The pipe has burst and not been fixed. Everyone has to bring in water from the hand pump outside. Lines start forming at five in the morning. No matter how early I start, I get late, didi.' We can picture it perfectly. We lecture her, mentor her, advise her. We threaten and cajole. But we do not have strict consequences: half a day's salary cut for the third tardy morning; dismissal upon ten tardy points. Partly we do not do this is because in a city like Banāras, no one does. To just hear of this policy would make staff members jittery and we would have a huge turnover on our hands. But partly we do it out of a vague humanitarianism.

When we think about it rationally, we realise our fallacy. Our whole exercise in running a model organisation is defeated by people like Kanti, the morning cook, coming late. If she is late, she cannot serve breakfast on time. Teachers cannot eat, or they cannot reach their classes on time. The idea of having them ready in good time before their classes is defeated. If we *did* have a staff turnover, the discomfort of training new staff members would be overridden by increased efficiency. But what about the human aspect of recognising Kanti's problems and wishing to support her in some of the structural weaknesses of civic life that she experiences?

Maybe what we need to do is to support her in other ways. We can change her job and her timings. We can offer her ways in which she can subvert or resolve the problems of water and so on. We can do a number of things, *after first ensuring the efficiency that we need to carry on those operations that are the* raison d'etre *of the organisation*. For that, we should make no compromises. For us to compromise on the discipline, and make excuses to the people victimised by *our* incompetence in managing our staff, is to replicate the behaviour of Kanti who feels victimised by the water supply branch of the Banāras Municipality. She feels that we ought to understand if she tells us this story. We in turn feel that teachers should understand about the late breakfast if we tell them Kanti's and then our story.

The cycle can never be broken thus. Our behaviour is like a model of the state of India. In both cases what needs to be done is to make a choice. If we want modern functioning, we have to have impeccable attention to punctuality, a myriad other rules, strict overseeing of them, and consequences when they are broken. We have to have a rule of rules: *make a hard rule and never break it*. In India, just as in our organisation, we have not confronted this harsh choice yet. In a sense we are too intelligent, because to be intelligent is to be flexible. We are too complex and can see the many texts currently playing themselves out, many beneath the surfaces. We are historically and socially sensitive. We can see others' points of view. We know that difference exists. For efficient management, for a modernity that functions, much of this must be sacrificed.

The biggest challenge posed by Banāras is this: how to modernise, to change effectively *in the interest of Banārasīs themselves*, without sacrificing the *joi de vivre*, the profound philosophy of balance, the sheer imagination and creativity of everyday life in the city. All the solutions and strategies that exist are destructive ones that impose one set of norms on another. More, they are all based on distrust and dislike.

I label them colonial, because of the 'us'-'them' divide that is inherent to a colonial relationship. I battled with trying to build strategies that are based on – pardon the mushy connotation inherent in the word – love. The strategies have an institutional home: a *Centre for Post-colonial Education.*

As everyone knows, the secret of true love is to like people for what they are and not in an image of them that we have created ourselves. To this, I add my historian's and anthropologist's perspective. People are 'what they are' in a complex way, in both space and time. In 'space,' they are not the category by which they are usually described. They are not simply their caste or community, their family or background. They are not transparent and predictable because of their education, their clothes or their speech. Rather they are the members of sub-groups and have self-definitions. They have identities defined by gender, class, age, and interest, and they make further voluntary divisions within the larger, more apparent category. Before we like them for 'what they are,' we need to labour to unpeel the covers over their preferred selves.

In 'time,' people are processes, on the way to becoming, rather than fixed entities who *are* something. Again, much labour is needed to understand what someone thinks she is and wants to be and is striving or dreaming to be. The dreams are not necessarily articulated or narrativised in ways known to us to be 'normal.' Quite possibly, when we ask 'What do you want for yourself?' of a non-modern person in Banāras, she will say, 'Nothing!' This does not mean that she has no ideas for her future. It means that she probably is not accustomed to the question-and-answer format we have used, the words in which we have strung our enquiry, or the immediacy of response we demand.

In my humble opinion, everyone wants change and those who seem to resist it perhaps resist the premises, language, or style of it, and not the fact of change. In my view, therefore, the love for a person and her values and lifestyle does not preclude working for change in them. She herself, in my view, is my best collaborator and partner in my pursuit of change. Rather than work *on* her, we have to work *with* her, including constantly mediating and translating, from our type of language to hers, from our familiar normative suppositions to her unfamiliar ideas.

Does it work? In all my writings on the subject, I stress that the process is important and not the result. If it works, it works slowly. If we can accept failure, and still not hate, but love, appreciate, or sympathise with the non-performer or non-cooperator, then we are truer to our goals than if we judge success with simple criteria.

The bottom line must remain love. In Banāras, I moved from the love described in earlier sections above when I say, 'I loved my artisans,' etcetera, to the love that cares enough to probe further as to what they actually are in the many dimensions of their identities and what they want to become. And the love that then dares to interact and interfere, because they want that, and they would do that.

The Post-colonial Centre works simply to provide education, teaching materials, training, workshops, counselling, arts classes, libraries and other resources. It

is itself in flux as projects are tried and dropped. The thrust is twofold: to develop a politics and psychology of one-ness, overcoming the divide of 'us' and 'them.' And to create and provide resources for actually overcoming this divide, be it books or films or camps or research.

This, together with the school, my continuing work in History and Anthropology along evolving, hopefully more imaginative, methodological lines, is the fruit of my long pilgrimage to Banāras.

'God Has Many Hands': Unauthorised informants and informative relationships during fieldwork in Banāras

Mikael Aktor

Hello! Where're you from?
The sound of the calls of young men approaching you as you walk along the ghāṭs is familiar to all visitors to Banāras. If you come from Delhi or – worse – from Agra, you will already know that these young men want to engage with you in some kind of Maussian gift transaction. They offer information, access to a temple, quick entrance to something that would otherwise take hours etc., and they do this not for a fixed price, nor completely for free, but for some undefined *counter-prestation*: 'If you like, you can give something, whatever you like – I'll be happy, you'll be happy, we will both be happy.'

Marcel Mauss's essay on gift exchange still stands as a brilliantly sharp analysis of such economic transactions. At your very first confrontation with such a person you might believe that by accepting his assistance you have just bought a commodity from a salesman – like a cup of chai from the chai wallah. Drink chai, pay the money, and walk away. But that is not what happened. The undefined payment (you forgot to ask about the price from the start) has transformed you from a customer to a *friend*, and therefore you have now entered into a whole series of obligations, each of which depends on the offers you receive (which all may be very helpful). The only way to break out is to refuse his further offers of assistance, which is now equal to breaking a friendship.

As the experienced visitor to India will know, there are also subtler ways. Your new friend may refuse any payment at all. But at some point he will bring you to 'his friend's beautiful silk shop' or he will want you – for your own spiritual welfare – to be blessed by his guru. You buy silks and give donations to the holy man, and he receives commission from shopowner and services from the paṇḍit.

Why do people make economic transactions like these? Because, in societies where economic security is fragile, people depend on networks of relatives and friends for mutual help. Customer relationships are single events, friendships are lasting. Realizing these facts of life, visitors to Banāras ought not treat these young boys with the contempt typical of the inexperienced, ignorant Western tourist, but should try to understand even more of the local social reality and the mindset it generates.

Academics usually avoid the assistance of these 'commission boys', as one of my high caste friends called them. Instead, they seek information from more reli-

able sources, such as well-esteemed local paṇḍits, or scholars specialised in their respective text traditions. But as an untrained fieldworker doing fieldwork within the area of everyday temple rituals as I did, it can be difficult to be allowed direct access. Hindu temple ritual is often a socially very exclusive affair requiring both proper Hindu descent and proper initiations. In this situation, the friendship and daily relationship with a group of young unauthorised tourist guides proved to be a valuable source of information for me – not the kind of information that was expected, however, but an insight into the relationship between religion and daily living conditions which is essential for an understanding of Hindu ritual. These friendships became part of a series of extended relationships that included holy men, gurus, and gods. A prior skepticism towards such 'Babas' was turned into an understanding of how religious relationships and networks function in a social context of material uncertainty.

Entering into religious relationships

In his book *Between Heaven and Earth* Robert Orsi suggests we should look upon religion more as a network of relationships 'between heaven and earth,' than as one of meanings or belief postulates (Orsi 2005: 5). To do pūjā, for instance, is a series of activities whereby the worshipper serves the deity and often asks favors of him or her. In whichever ways the worshipper translates these activities into beliefs or meanings, his or her acts are directed at someone as in a social relationship. Deities and holy persons have a place in the worshipper's world and are made present through these acts of service.

But there is a split between beliefs and practices – the latter cannot be translated one-to-one to the former. Gods are made present in acts of worship, but that is not the same as articulating a theory about their existence. Ritual acts are a medium by which gods are brought into a communicative relation with worshippers, but in a discursive medium like philosophical language, for instance, things become questionable and – for some of us – unconvincing.

Even despite this professional skepticism, fieldworkers get involved in the same chains of relationships as their informants are, including the gods they worship. Orsi tells how he was present at a Vodou ceremony in New York, where the Vodou psychopomp Papa Gede – through the medium Mama Lola – spoke tenderly to him in a manner that addressed very personal dilemmas of Orsi's life, despite the usual very coarse and rude nature of Papa Gede. Students asked Orsi whether he really believed in Papa Gede. But belief is not the point. Involvement is:

> Scholars of religion become preoccupied with themselves as interpreters of meanings, and so they forget that we do our work of interpretation within the network of relationships between heaven and earth, in the company of those among whom we have gone to study, in the field or in the archives. (Orsi 2005: 6)

As a relationship between heaven and earth, both poles remain unmediated. Men and women maintain their all too human characteristics despite their interaction with

gods. This easily becomes a problem for all the people who have positioned themselves in the middle of the spectrum in order to claim a part of the divine – priests, sādhus, monks, saṃnyāsins, etc. To remain there, they have allegedly sublimated their human needs for sensual pleasures, sex, and money. This is a very fragile position, as there is no logical half-way between the two poles. Edmund Leach saw this very clearly long ago:

> Consider the following syllogism:
> (1) Since deities are immortal it is anomalous that a god/goddess should reproduce himself/herself by sexual intercourse.
> (2) Since men are mortal it is anomalous that a man/woman should not reproduce himself/herself by sexual intercourse.
> (3) It is therefore anomalous for a god-man either to reproduce himself by sexual intercourse or not to do so. (Leach 1976: 72)

Leach goes on to show some of the many paradoxical solutions to this problem: ascetics who are seduced by a harlot who then turns into a sainted ancestress – or we could add from field experience in Banāras a much more crude example: Tantric Babas who seduce naive female tourists on the ghāṭs pretending the harassment to be a spiritual blessing of the girl. One Russian colleague that I met at Vatika (the restaurant at Assi Ghāṭ famous for its apple pie served with vanilla ice cream) was utterly disgusted and very disappointed by his meetings with these sādhus.[1] He had returned to Banāras to study classical philosophical commentaries with one of the few paṇḍits in the world who is still capable of understanding and explaining the tradition in which he was interested. When he arrived in India for the first time, he approached the sādhus at the ghāṭs expecting to find holiness and deep spirituality. But what he saw was men in ochre robes seducing Western female tourists – if they were not too stoned through hashish. I was surprised that he was surprised. What did he expect? During the five months of my stay in Banāras I was offered everything on the ghāṭs: hashish, opium, young women, young men. 'What do you want? I can get for you.' Still, my walks on the ghāṭs and in the small lanes behind them were for me a constant source of spirituality – not spirituality in the spiritual sense, but the spirituality of the diversity of real-life situations unfolding in the religious stage drama which is Banāras. One image comes to my mind: an early morning walk to the river, everything still dark and desolate except for an old Brahmin sitting all alone at the water with worn pages of scriptures, reciting mantras in a steady and rhythmic voice over a small fire that lights up his face in the dark night. If being emotionally touched by such a sight is a sign of being religious, I am a religious man.

1 Due to the personal character of the information in this chapter most persons have been fictionalized and matters concerning their subject of research, their business, and living place and conditions have been obscured. All stories about them, however, reflect real events and persons.

Although Orsi's emphasis on involvement and empathy can be read mistakenly as a return to an uncritical phenomenology of religious experience, it is far from romantic or uncritical. A religious life is not necessarily a happy life at all. 'For better or worse: what humans do with the saints is not always, or even often, good for themselves,' he writes (Orsi 2005: 2). Orsi wants to replace the meaning-making religious subject of earlier decades of religious scholarship with 'a more tragic figure whose engagements with the world, within particular circumstances of power, proceed through media that may embody meanings *against* him or her. *Persons working on the world do so always in the context of the world's working on them*' (ibid.: 170; italics added).

How then do the religious relationships that I engaged in with Banāras' underclass of young unauthorised tourist guides, their gurus and chosen deities reflect the working of Banāras on them? The following is part of an answer, as far as anything like that can be found for an outsider.

Raju and Manoj

I first met Raju and Manoj on my first trip to India in 2009. This was a simple tourist trip together with my daughter. On our very first afternoon, we were walking along the ghāṭs from Assi towards Daśāśvamedh when these two young men addressed us. They offered to take us to the Gaṅgā Sevā that night, and to show us temples and other places of interest. 'Why not,' I thought. 'If they get troublesome, I'll pay them some money for their effort, and that's it.' But they never asked for money. When lastly I asked them why they spent their time helping us in this way, they said, 'It's only for our good karma.' I was not convinced.

They took us to the 'Monkey Temple' (Saṅkaṭ Mocan) and the Durgā Temple. We went with them to see the Gaṅgā Sevā. They showed us what tourists are generally shown along the ghāṭs, and arranged an early morning boat trip. But they also took us to several places where they would receive commission. Silk shops. Perfume and spice makers. Raju's guru. 'I go to my guru every day and learn mantra.' Raju was otherwise unemployed and with poor schooling. But he was smart and good at showing tourists around and arranging for boat trips and other excursions.

Manoj's English was much better than Raju's. He told us that this was due to the fact that he was an orphan, growing up at the local Mother Theresa Centre at Śivālā Ghāṭ. He worked in a weaver's shop as an apprentice, work for which he received no money but some training. We visited his workshop and learned about the different weaving techniques. In the evening they introduced us to one of the places with live music, the wonderful Music Paradise Hall in the small lanes between Śivālā and Assi Crossing. The program that night was excellent. My daughter talked with the tabla player who suggested she should come for lessons. She did – and had to buy a tabla.

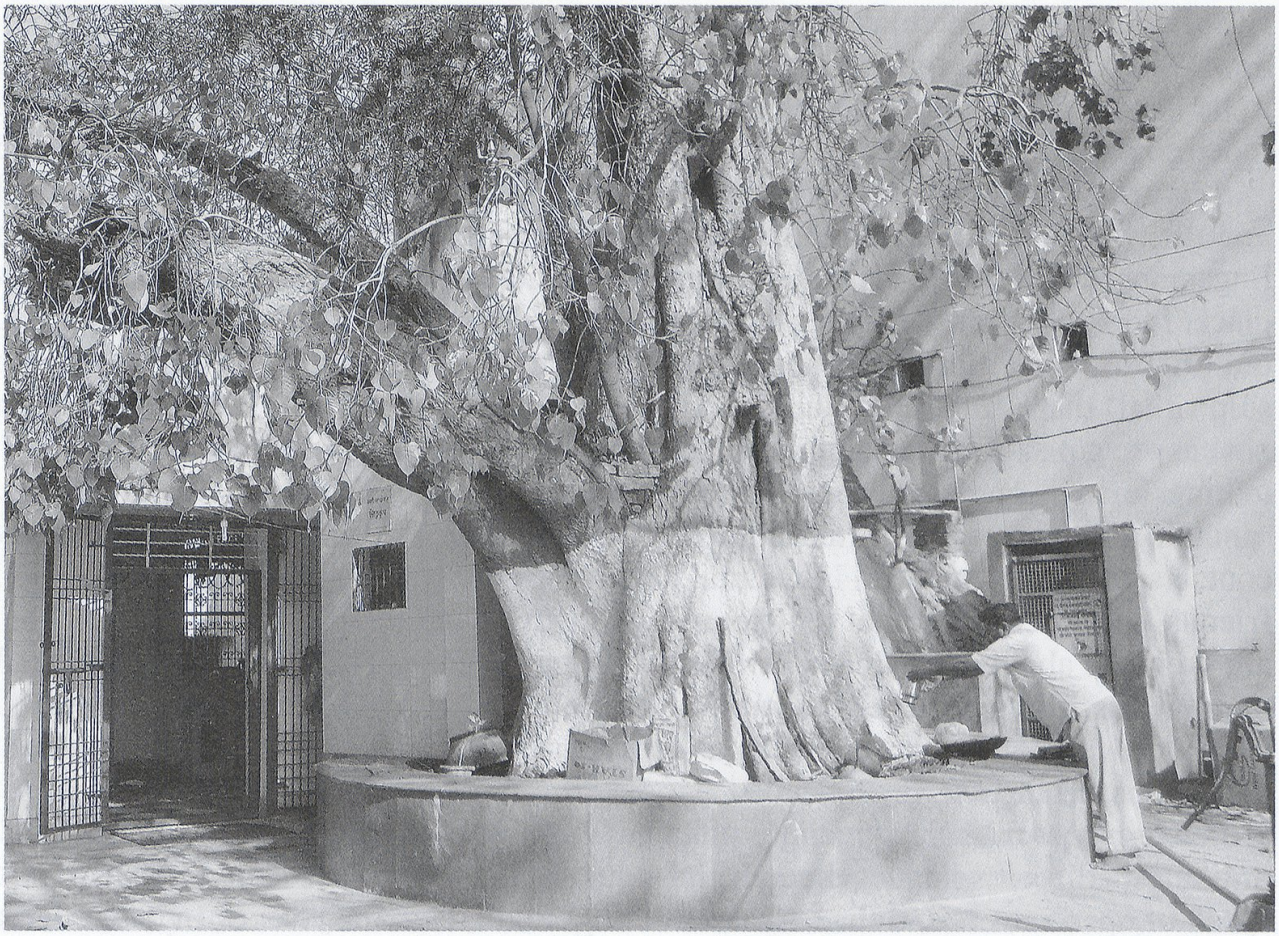
Raju and Manoj were good company. They showed us places we would never have had a chance to see for ourselves. We stayed with them for most of the week we were in Banāras. They never asked for anything. But I guess they got a little from the

silk shop, the perfume maker and perhaps Raju's guru. They also had several other new Western friends to look after besides me and my daughter. Everything seemed to be about making contacts and networks. We exchanged email addresses, and we received regular updates from them.

I returned to Banāras in 2011 to do fieldwork on the iconography of the Śiva liṅga and the ritual practices related to this the most central representation of Śiva. Śiva liṅgas are ubiquitous in whole of India, but more so in Banāras than in any other place. I took photos of all types of liṅgas I came across on the ghāṭs, in lanes and in building recesses. But I soon realized the need to learn the details of the pūjā (worship ritual) that is offered to the liṅga in temples and private houses. Generally it is not easy to get close to the temple pūjās performed for the liṅga. One may be allowed to enter many temples, but to sit and study the pūjā at close quarters in the inner sanctum of temples will often require special permission gained through private contacts or friendships with influential people. Even then it may be difficult, as these friends know very well that temple priests (pujārīs) and temple trust officials often are skeptical about non-Hindus being so close to the liṅga. The idea seems to be that non-Hindus, especially by being non-vegetarian, may bring pollution to the temple. Our knowledge of proper temple conduct is mistrusted, and it is sometimes assumed that we have not bathed or cleaned ourselves properly. This strikes Westerners as somewhat hypocritical, especially after having observed the hygienic standards of ordinary bathrooms in guest houses and restaurants as well as at sacred sites – not to speak of open sewers and the carcasses of dogs and rats in the river or in the streets. But the difference is that Hindus have undergone the *saṃskāras* (rites of passage) of birth and childhood, have received the proper mantras, and have been born to Hindu mothers. Besides, pūjā can be a very intimate affair: people come to the temple with strong desires to help or for protection, and foreign onlookers who do not blend in and who do not know how to behave properly during the pūjā worship are disturbing elements.

At that time, my good friend, Professor Rana P. B. Singh, head of the Department of Geography at Banāras Hindu University, suggested a visit to a small temple, the Siddheśvar Mahādev Mandir located inside the Goyankā Sanskrit School, behind the Assi Crossing.[2] It is a very small, intimate temple dedicated to Siddheśvara Mahādeva, a liṅga of a rather rough grey stone. The liṅga is considered *svayambhu*, self-created, and therefore without ornamentation, iconographic details, or lines, apart from the light marble base in which it is placed and the brass snake that is attached to it.

2 The temple is mentioned as number 889 in the list of 'Divinities & Locations' in Singh (2009: 412).



The entrance to the Siddheśvar Mahādev Mandir

To learn the pūjā details I needed a guide who would be willing to follow me to the temple and do the pūjā together with me. Again I turned to Raju. I had met him very soon after I arrived in Banāras. He was hanging out at Assi Ghāṭ together with his friends, most of whom were unemployed like him and therefore either engaged as unauthorised tourist guides like Raju or as cycle rickshaw drivers, or did nothing at all. I also met Manoj again. He had shaved his head, leaving only a tuft of hair. I learned that this was because his mother had died, and he had performed the cremation rites – probably the most inexpensive ones. People told me that Manoj's mother was one of the miserable beggars living beneath the shelter at Assi Ghāṭ. No one had told me this before. She was sick, but Manoj had no money to get her to a doctor.

At the start of this visit I felt uneasy about receiving more unasked-for assistance from these guys, but on the other hand they were good company, and – again as we know from Marcel Mauss – to reject an invitation, even for a cup of chai, can be an expression of disrespect. In Banāras a cup of chai is not only that. It is a setting for conversation and for exchange of favors of a different kind. I needed a bicycle, and before I had given it a second thought, Raju had a bicycle for me. He had rented it from a friend, one of the cooks in the Bread of Life bakery, and he had made an arrangement with a particular cycle shop along the main road between Assi and Śivālā

Crossings, that I should go to him (and only him) if I needed any repair. On asking for the price, the answer was the well known 'You're my friend.'

Anyhow, it was me who needed help. I asked Raju if he knew anyone who would follow me to the temple, do pūjā, and teach me the details. It took a while to explain. Why would anyone want something like that? But having once understood the idea, he grasped his mobile and made a phone call. 'I called Vijay. He's a very high Brahmin, very high Brahmin. Five minutes, he will be here.'

Vijay

Vijay is a man in his twenties like Raju and the other guys. His English is understandable, but not good enough to show he has had a proper schooling. He is very helpful and sincere. I tell him what I want. We find a place to sit, and he tells me the details of pūjā, what things to bring – the correct leaves and flowers related to Śiva, a pot for water, camphor for waving lamps, etc. We find a pūjā shop, buy a nice pot and a small amount of camphor. We meet early next morning, collect Ganges water in a Coca Cola bottle (Vijay regrets this choice of container), and buy bel leaves (from the wood apple tree), madar flower garlands (made of white crown flowers), grass (for Gaṇeś), dhātūra (thorn apple fruit) and marigold garlands. We enter the temple and both approach the liṅga. Vijay's body language expresses his slight discomfort as he feels the attention of the priest and the other temple visitors on this strange sight: me, a Westerner, closely watching Vijay by my side doing the pūjā while imitating all his movements to the best of my ability – grasping with my left hand around the right arm which is stretched out holding the leaves or flowers correctly with the thumb and two middle fingers, gently slipping these items one by one onto the top of the liṅga, then lighting lamps and incense and doing āratī. Of course my pūjā is not fully correct as I do not know the specific mantras. But *oṃ namaḥ śivāya* is always safe and appropriate. I realize that what I am after is not the correct style of worship. I can read about that in classical texts like the 'Pūjāprakāśa' of the *Vīramitrodaya* by Mitramiśra. What is exciting here in Banāras is to study how people in actual daily practice do the pūjā, and it seems that Vijay is quite knowledgeable.

Vijay has been brought up in a Brahmin family in Ballia close to the border with Bihar. His father was a railway employee who also taught Vijay proper worship. Unfortunately both parents died recently, and this has left Vijay and his two brothers with a lot of problems – primarily because they are all unemployed. One brother and a sister have had a good education but still have no job. Vijay takes short-term jobs in guesthouses in Banāras but frequently returns home to the shared house in Ballia to try to find a way out of their poor financial situation.

During the next couple of days we visit his friends, and together we meet with a paṇḍit who gives advice on all kinds of personal issues. Vijay inquires about a mantra he has received. He wants to know if it can be effective for 'family things,' by which he means a solution to their poor financial situation and his brothers' unemployment. We also visit his astrologer friend, Nitesh, who is busy with a waiting room full of clients. Some need to settle a date for a wedding, others need advice on

how to avoid a huge claim for payment of a debt. It is also Nitesh who explains to me the true meaning of the many finger rings that Indian men wear, not as an expression of excessive male vanity as I suspected, but as means of protection based on a connection between individual horoscopes and specific precious stones – another very common fact that is rarely taught in university textbooks on Hinduism.

Vijay suggests that I come and stay with him in Ballia in spring during the *navarātri* festival. He will be performing pūjā for Mother Durgā every day 'to protect the house and the family,' and together we will visit some of the main temples in the area. For me this is a chance to stay with a family during the ritual, so I welcome the invitation. Every day Vijay takes an early bath, puts on a beautiful yellow garment (*dhotī*) and starts worshipping with a *havana* (fire altar) in front of his small altar. He wants me to assist him by reciting the Mahāmṛtyuñjaya Mantra (ṚV 7.59.12), which is considered by most people I spoke to an especially potent mantra for preventing or curing serious disease or hindering other life-threatening situations. Many of the more educated Hindus would never allow it.

Each day Vijay's friends drop by. They are very close and Vijay repeatedly mentions them to me as his 'underwear brothers.' I'm intrigued. My Hindi is still not particularly good and I guess something is missing in my understanding so I ask him about this strange idiom. He writes down the Hindi expression and I look it up in the dictionary: '*laṃgoṭiyā yār*, m. a close friend, literally a friend related to the loin cloth,' hence Vijay's expression 'underwear brothers', but what mystical connection exists between a loin cloth and close friendship never becomes clear to me. They spend hours sitting in Vijay's bed talking about the state of the world and sipping chai. Except for one – a sweet-vendor – all are unemployed. When not in Vijay's house, they walk around on other visits and – maybe because of my stay – tour the temples. In the morning Rajesh, the sweet-vendor, takes me on his scooter to the nearby Bramhāīn Durgā Temple. We buy *prasād* related to Durgā – red cloth, coconut, etc. – and we quickly make our offerings in front of the beautiful old black metal image with big gold-coated eyes and leave.

Vijay asks me if I have any ideas as to how he may get money for renovating the shared house and turn it into a guesthouse. The bank has refused him any loans until he has at least 200,000 Rs in his account. There are no easy solutions. In fact, most of his petty jobs in guesthouses were unremunerated. For the time being, he tries to make friends with Western tourists and make them interested in supporting his non-governmental organization (NGO). Some do.

During the *navarātri* festival I sense tensions in the family. Vijay thinks that his daily pūjā helps the family, but the brothers find it waste of time. On the other hand, Vijay tells me that one brother wasted a lot of the family's money gambling. The strained financial situation thus typically affects both their religious life (Vijay's ritual efforts) and attitudes towards it (his brothers' skepticism). It also triggers a lot of creativity in the building of relief NGOs of various kinds. Everyone walking the streets of Banāras will notice the frequent street signs of large numbers of NGOs, many of which are without any real foundation except as an income for the founder.

Vijay has set up such an NGO that hands out free early morning chai on the ghāṭs on the days of the new moon. During my stay at his home he asks me to join, which means paying an enrolment fee of 500 Rs plus similar annual fees. Some of his other European friends are already members and of course I become a member too. He arranges a photo session at his house together with his brothers and friends and with me as an honorary VIP member. The photos will be used to promote the NGO. He asks me to dress in a nice white *kurtā* set, put on a Nehru hat (made of paper though) with a garland around my neck and *tilak* on the forehead, and to pose for the camera while signing some kind of important-looking document or book with the rest of the party gathered around me. A banner with the name of the NGO has been hung over the table, but it does not stay up and appears lopsided on the photos. Nevertheless, they were content with my performance and kept telling me that I look like Gandhi.

After Vijay and I returned to Banāras, we met nearly every day for the rest of my time there. As a last trip we did the Pañcakrośī (the pilgrimage circuit that encircles the city of Banāras) together on Vijay's scooter – though just the highlights. The roads are very bumpy – so much so that I ended up with bruised ribs from bouncing around on the back seat of his scooter.

What does Raju want from me?

At this time, which was near the end of my stay in Banāras, Raju seemed to change. Earlier he would never express personal needs – 'It's for my good karma.' But now he meets me with a desperate expression on his face. 'I'm not happy,' he tells me. I know that he wants both a motorcycle and a laptop. I have told him to try to get enrolled for a real education as an official tourist guide for which he would also need money, and I have suggested that I might support him economically with the enrolment fee if only he is serious about it. So what does he want now? For the first time in our friendship he asks me to lend him some money. He is in trouble it seems. When Vijay gets to know about this – that Raju has asked me for money – Vijay takes action. I get my money back from Vijay (not directly from Raju), and Raju does not approach me again. Instead Vijay reveals to me the truth about Raju. He has become more and more entangled in financial troubles. He knows that many of the young female tourists that he takes around as their guide easily become attracted to him and he has regularly been involved in love affairs with more than one of them at a time. This has been going on for a long time, but now it is serious because a Czech woman he has been showing around told him that she is pregnant and is insisting that he, as the father, must pay her child support. Raju's family of course does not know anything about this, but as he becomes more and more embroiled in another person's financial situation, it is difficult to hide. I did not see him again, and I do not know if his friends raised the money or if they persuaded the woman to have an abortion.

'God has many hands'

One of the young men in the gang frequently sees a Baba who lives in his ashram in an apartment a 10–15 minute scooter ride from Assi Ghāṭ. He and the others want

me to meet with the holy man. One evening we all go, with me as usual on the back seat of Vijay's scooter. Here I must confess that I have my own story with Indian holy men to tell. When I was young back in the late 1960s/early 1970s, I got involved in a Yoga movement in my hometown of Copenhagen. The movement was centered round one of the many gurus that came to Europe and the USA at that time with the expectation of converting the young generation from blind Western materialism to ancient Indian spirituality. They came to the West as a second wave of Hindu missionaries intent on fulfilling Swami Vivekananda's call:

> Up, India, and conquer the world with your spirituality! [...] Spirituality must conquer the West. Slowly they are finding out that what they want is spirituality to preserve them as nations. They are waiting for it, they are eager for it. [...] They have searched every corner of the world and have found no respite. They have drunk deep of the cup of pleasure and found it vanity. Now is the time to work so that India's spiritual ideas may penetrate deep into the West. Therefore, [...] we must go out, we must conquer the world through our spirituality and philosophy. (*The Complete Works of the Swami Vivekananda*, 33: 276–7, quoted in Hay 1988: 76)

But as it happened, most of these Hindu teachers came with very little knowledge of the life of young people in the West or of Western societies in general. Their experiments with this young generation therefore had many unforeseen and unfortunate consequences besides the spiritual benefits that individuals might have experienced. These consequences were most frequently related to failed demands for sexual continence, to authoritarian Hindu norms regarding the upbringing and schooling of children, and to clashes with Western values such as critical and independent thinking that young people were not easily inclined to give up, besides, of course, the different expectations of material wealth.

After years in a monastic-like yoga and meditation center with a guru who, like others, got caught up in a self-imposed status as infallible knower of truth that became increasingly strained by his open support of traumatic right-wing views of the recent history of Europe and of ideas of human sexuality (including my own) that in Europe had been discarded as unhealthy long ago, I quit the movement – and started on an academic study of religions. With the baggage of this old experience my acceptance of meetings with holy men in Banāras was not uncritical.

We arrived at the building and went up to the second floor where the Swami had his private apartment. We were made to sit outside on the stairway and were told that the Swami would come and speak with us through bars between the stairs and the hallway of his apartment. The Swami was a frail old bearded man in a white shirt and bare legs. Having been presented to him by my friends, he handed me – through the bars – a copy of his passport issued in 2010. According to this copy his name was Swami Sivananda, and he was born in Behala, West Bengal, on the 8th of August 1896.[3] 'I am 116 years old,' he told us again and again. This information only

3 Later back home in Denmark I gathered more information about this Sivananda. His ashram

added to my already distanced attitude to holy men in Banāras. He also handed me a printed card presenting himself as follows:

> Ever joyful Baba is free from diseases, desire, lust, attraction, attachment, tension, contemplation, pride and has no materialistic urge or need. Baba never takes fruit or milk. Baba never accepts money or any kind of donation from any person for his personal use.

During our conversation he went to and from between his chair at the bars and the private rooms of the apartment from where he brought photocopied notes with health advice about the 'miracles of fasting' as well as invitations to come and eat:

> You are whole-heartedly requested to take Rice Prasad (Rice, Dal and Vegetables) at 1 P.M. free of cost on any Sunday. Please note that Swami Sivananda is not at all willing to accept your donation for his personal life.

How is that? A man praising the miracles of fasting and at the same time keeping an ashram dedicated to feeding anyone who comes to his door? And how can he feed these many guests without accepting donations of money?

My friends told him about my work in Banāras, while I remained mostly silent and listened to the conversation. They asked Babaji about their very real problems, but the standard answer was 'surrender completely to Lord Viśvanāth' or 'meditate wholeheartedly on the feet of God and remember His name. The Lord sees you always and cares for you.' One of Vijay's problems concerns one of his brothers who has not been successful in finding a wife (or is it actually Vijay himself?). Vijay asks the Baba to suggest a woman who might meet Vijay's brother. But Babaji is shocked at this request. His women disciples in attendance reply that 'Babaji never enters into such affairs.' Nevertheless he goes to his room and comes back with a note to Vijay with a mantra that is supposed to solve family problems. Later, on our ride back to Assi, Vijay remarks, 'I don't need a mantra, I need energy.' I start reflecting on the incongruence between the real problems encountered every day and the religious solutions offered by men like our Babaji. What is it worth? We are, however, invited to return, and take our meal the coming Sunday.

On Sunday we are received by the women disciples who are busy cooking the meal. We notice others also coming to eat. They look poor and very much in need of a good meal. While waiting, the women disciples tell us more about the Baba. He grew up in a very poor family. Hunger was a daily condition. Throughout his childhood he – like so many other children even in today's India – had to go to sleep at night with an empty stomach and a gnawing hunger. Later as a young man he made the decision that he would dedicate his life to the goal that no man should ever experience that kind of hunger. Having spent years in monastic training, he established his own ashram in which he combines his own ascetic eating habits, which involve

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or his disciples maintain two different web pages about his activities: http://sivanandababa.org/ and http://sivanandaparivar.com/.

frequent fasting with a generous distribution of food to everyone who comes to his house. I am sincerely impressed at how this terrible childhood experience of hunger got transformed into a determination to offer food for others.

Looking around the room I see heaps of vegetables and sacks of rice etc. on the floor. I ask the disciples how Babaji can afford this generosity without receiving any money. How is all this food purchased? Vijay answers quietly 'God has many hands.' He elaborates while on the scooter going back after the visit: 'One man buys a bag of rice, another man a bag of dal. Like this.' Finally I get the point. People come to Babaji's ashram with food which they offer to the ashram, not to Babaji. From this food the meals are prepared and poor men and women get a free meal. Babaji maintains his regimen of fasting and modest eating in order not to create the impression that the food is for him.

It strikes me that there is something I did not understand until now. In a country where resources are shared so unequally as in India, where most of the population struggles with basic needs related to keeping a family and securing proper schooling for their children or medical care, and where millions of young men are unemployed like Raju, Manoj, Vijay, and their friends, religion is inseparable from the material conditions of life. People are left with their own solutions. They depend on close networks, living with the help of friends or of friends of friends. When there are no immediate material solutions available, holy men and gods are invited to become members of the network. Mantras may not solve people's real problems, but food certainly can. In order to mobilize that kind of voluntary mutual effort that is required for distributing food in a population where few have any economic excess, strong religious role models like the fasting Babaji and his ideals of self-surrender to God serve as a dynamic force. Each person in such a voluntary network becomes one of God's many hands. More often than not someone is the receiver, at other times he or she is the hand that gives.

Rudrābhiṣek

I ended my stay in Banāras by performing a Rudhrābhiṣek at the Siddheśvar Mahādev temple where I had been doing pūjā together with Vijay. I found that many of the persons I was dealing with on a daily basis – my Hindi teacher, travel agent and others – perform this ritual regularly. The ritual is regarded as a prevention of adversities for the period to come – the length of the period depending among other things on the price for the ritual you are willing to pay. This of course is never articulated as a payment for a service but as a freely given donation received by the priests – we are back where we started with Marcel Mauss. As a fieldworker studying how liṅga pūjā is performed, the Rudrābhiṣek is valuable, because in this ritual the worshipper is placed in the role of the pujārī, only assisted by professional priests who pass the ingredients to the worshipper and recite the mantras. During the ritual I would do all the services, pour Ganges water and milk over the liṅga, offer flowers, incense, lamps, and many other services.

I was well prepared, obeyed the rules, and turned up in a brand new kurtā set and

turban. The ritual is intense as one, for instance, is required to stretch out the right arm for more than 20 minutes holding a metal horn that is filled with milk and has a nozzle at the bottom, from where the milk is sprayed on the top of the liṅga, all while constantly reciting *oṃ namaḥ śivāya*. The whole ritual lasted about an hour and a half. Professor Rana P. B. Singh, who had advised me to visit this temple earlier, was present together with his wife and son, and documented everything with photographs. After the ritual I handed the donation for the priests through my friends, not to the priests directly.

The author performing the Rudrābhiṣeka ritual in the Siddheśvar Mahādev Mandir on May 11, 2011. Photo by Rana P.B. Singh

The ritual left me in a mood that cannot but be described as devotional. While in Ballia together with Vijay and his family, I had asked them what quality in their opinion most adequately characterizes Hinduism. They agreed that devotion (*bhakti*) is the essential quality. That morning I took my last walk along the ghāṭs. I went up to Lalitā Ghāṭ, visited the small Gaṅgā temple just above the water level (in the dry season) and climbed up to the platform at the Nepālī Temple from where there is a broad view over the river and the city. In the afternoon I sat at my home ghāṭ, Śivālā, watching the buffalo owners bathing their buffaloes in the lazy river, thus bringing them relief from the scorching sun of Banāras in May.

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Experiencing Banāras in the 1950s: Colonial ghosts and village tradition

Paul Younger

Arrival

I was a naive American when I arrived in Banāras for the first time in July of 1957. The rickshaw driver who would take us on the long trip around the western side of the city had tried to warn us that we might not be allowed to enter the university. It was hard to understand what he meant so my friend and I urged him to allow us to try. The gate of the university was blocked by a hundred or so student protesters lying across the roadway. They were enthusiastic to meet us and urged us to join them. We agreed that we would join them later, and they instructed the rickshaw driver to speed us to the International House.

My background to that point starts from the fact that I was raised in a small Pennsylvania town called Mountain Top. Nobody in the town had ever gone to college before, but my father, who himself had left school to work after grade 6 but had become a self educated Presbyterian minister, insisted that all of his children would be going to college. During my second year in high school I was excited to be part of the high school basketball team. My father, however, had read about the Ford Foundation Pre-Induction college scholarships, and I soon found myself in Lafayette College at 15 years of age. I guess I was instinctively rebellious because I had always disliked the missionary literature scattered around our living room and could easily see how demeaning it was toward the cultures that were the object of the missionary endeavors. In college I would listen somewhat more carefully to the 'liberal' views of my professors, but once again was put off by their insistence that the American way was superior to the Soviet, and that Third World people like Nehru should understand that.

Imagining that I somehow had an invisible tie to this Third World, I enrolled at Princeton Theological Seminary where there were quite a few students from Third World countries. Before long I was working in a small church made up of a few 'white' families in the heart of the 'black' section of the city of Trenton. On my first Sunday in town I was invited to dine with an African-American family and ended up joining them for the evening service in their storefront church. Ladies from that church had been effectively breaking up riots in the city with a form of non-violent action they had learned by reading about Gandhi, and I soon joined them. As we became widely known in the city, I began to feel that I was part of a vibrant culture that was in its own way a kind of Third World.

In Princeton Seminary at the time a number of students were talking about the International Studies Program, which was the brainchild of a couple of graduates of Princeton Seminary who considered themselves liberal and wanted a scheme that would enable American youth to get a better perspective on the Third World. My classmate, Frank van Aalst, thought this was a great idea and pictured my interests as fitting into it. I was hesitant about the plan because I suspected an Americanizing ethos behind the whole idea, but the ladies from Trenton urged me to go and learn more about Gandhi's message. It was not long before Frank and I agreed to go to India together and we started to read everything we could about India.

The choice of Banāras as the place for our studies seemed intuitively right from very early in our discussions. In Banāras we would be diving into the heart of the culture and avoiding most of the impact of the British. We were aware that at the time 'Americans' were watched carefully wherever they went, but we had been advised by Indian friends in Princeton to wear Indian clothes and eat Indian food and the questions would soon cease.

By late afternoon on the day we arrived in Banāras, my friend and I were able to slip out of the front gate of the university in our Indian clothes, rent a bicycle and end up in Godaulia and the ghāṭs or steps down into the holy Ganges river. Down by the river, no one asked what we were doing. The line between dream and reality vanished, and the eternal city became my home.

The International House

The International House at the time was a kind of surreal island made up of visitors from every corner of the globe. Prominent were the three from China, two from (north) Viet Nam, three from Bali, and two from Turkey who were there learning the language of Prime Minister Nehru's Pancha Sila Third World initiative. My first fond memory of the House was sitting in the shadows of the garden at night while a Viet Nam friend played a haunting cry for home on his little two-string instrument. When a little later engineering students recruited me to play basketball for the university team, I brought along a Chinese friend. We eventually won the national championship and some excited headlines about India's role in bringing about American-Chinese friendship.

More surprising in some ways were the numerous pioneering European scholars who stayed for longer or shorter periods of time. Just an hour before we arrived Swami Agehananda Bharati had been asked to leave the House for having a European lady and a bottle of wine in his room. He was already the legendary look-alike of Subhas Chandra Bose and liked to tell the story of his teen-aged service in the Indian National Army in Germany. He proudly associated that early experience of India with the language skills he used so masterfully in wandering the Indian countryside as an initiated tantric monk. Tony Alston appeared to be someone left from the time of British rule. He described studying obscure Sanskrit texts all day, but then, in an Oxford accent few could understand, regaled all and sundry over dinner each evening with stories about the foibles of Indian civilization. Father (Raimundo)

Panikkar roared into the compound once a week on his huge motorcycle and stayed for hours while everyone in the House seemed to gather to listen in on his conversation about the Trinitarian characteristics of the Hindu mythical figures. Many in the group would also accept his invitation to go to his apartment in Lanka or the shopping area outside the university entrance where on Sunday and certain auspicious Hindu holy days eclectic services would be held blending Sanskrit prayers with elements of the Catholic liturgy. At the time, I enjoyed the idiosyncracy displayed by Bharati, Alston and Panikkar, but it was only years later when my own scholarly interests had developed that I would count them as friends and appreciate how brilliantly each of them was at the time probing the depths of Indian thinking.

Entrance to the Banaras Hindu University

At the time, the more serious intellectual and spiritual development for me occurred when a Romanian Orthodox monk named Andrei Scrima moved into an upstairs room of the House. Like others in this era, Andrei was a self taught Sanskritist who was serving as librarian to the Romanian Patriarch when Vice President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan visited Bucharest. On behalf of the government of India, Dr. Radhakrishnan invited Andrei to India, and they decided on Banāras. Andrei seldom left his room, but decided early on that I could benefit from spiritual training and offered to teach me the discipline of saying the Jesus Prayer under my breath throughout the day. As I learned the Prayer from him, he picked my brain about my visits to temples and festival ceremonies, and later on about my involvement in the Chittapur Harijan village working with the Bhoodan (*bhūdān*) movement. Enriching my extended discipleship with Andrei were conversations he held during those years with other

pioneering scholars. Frits Staal, the Dutch scholar who had finished his thesis on Neo-Vedānta and had seen some of the Vedic sacrifices performed by the Namboodiris in Kerala was there for a while. Patrick (Herb) Sullivan who was reflecting on his experience in the Aurobindo Ashram was there for most of a year. Karl Potter stayed for some time as he started on what would become his philosophical encyclopaedia. And Richard Robinson stayed for a while as he toured around the city and figured out how his Wisconsin students might learn from just being in this richly open place with such deep spiritual roots.

The British Legacy

Although we had hoped to plunge deep into India and avoid British influence by going to Banāras, that was not as easy as we had imagined. During the rickshaw ride on our first day we had seen a towering church steeple. When we decided to find our way back there the next Sunday, we discovered a community deeply buried in dusty layers of colonial missionary strategy. The service was intended to be in Hindi, but when we arrived both the Indian Padre and his missionary supervisor Alan Neech began to insert an equal amount of English for our benefit. After the service the Padre took me out into the walled compound and pointed out his modest new house and the long row of huts at the back of the compound where the rest of the congregation, who, he explained were of 'a low caste', lived. He suggested that we go to his house for tea, but Frank and Alan Neech soon came out of the church and enthusiastically announced that we were going to the missionary compound a few miles away for lunch. As I hesitated, Reverend Neech took the Padre aside and explained to him how this modified version of a colonial arrangement would work.

The compound in which the Neeches lived was about five acres of manicured flower gardens with a bungalow designed for four missionary families. Reverend and Mrs. Neech were the only ones living there at the time but they still needed a watchman, a gardener, a cook, a clothes washer, a house cleaner, as well as part-time drivers and nannies when the children were not in school. Mrs. Neech was a medical doctor, but had not found a way of using her training in Banāras and spent almost half the year in the hill station of Ootacamund in South India where they maintained a bungalow near their children's school. Over lunch they explained to us the missionary etiquette of the day which ranged from avoiding all temples and holy men, who, they said, were known to use drugs and black magic on foreigners, to keeping away from all food and water not specifically prepared for foreigners. They urged us to bike to the Cantonment area the next week because even though it was no longer restricted to British and Anglo-Indian residents, there was a proper Anglican service for the Anglo-Indians every other week there and Clarks' Hotel nearby still maintained the atmosphere of the 'old days' (meaning the recent colonial past). Our friendship with the Neeches was not destined to last, nor were the missionary arrangements they symbolized. A few weeks later the Indian Padre came out to the university to tell us he had quarrelled with the Neeches and was being transferred to a village setting, and a couple of years later the women from the back of the church

compound pulled their charpoys (*cārpāī*, cot) out onto the main road to protest the demeaning treatment of the missionaries, and I was able to sit with them and discuss their new sense of their legal rights and their future role as Indian Christians.

The tail end of the missionary era in Banāras was a sad story but a rapidly disappearing one. The other aspect of the British legacy that remained was the scholarly style of the university, and it was much more difficult to discern if and when it would disappear. In the years to come many Western scholars who went to Banāras would simply by-pass the university and explore the rich religious life of the city directly on their own. In our case we had planned to take our studies in the university seriously, and, as we were to learn, that left us stranded on a bridge between two cultures. Fortunately for us, the students and faculty in our programme had begun to recognize that they were caught on the same bridge and were happy to have us to talk with about our common dilemma. 'Indology' was a hybrid discipline that a few faculty thought would take them away from the stodgy and massive departments of History, Literature and Philosophy that the British had established in all university Arts Faculties. In those older departments faculty read out notes designed for exams on political history and classical literary pieces, but by the 1950s the massive numbers in class insisted that this traditional content be offered to them in colloquial Hindi. By establishing a separate College of Indology for post-secondary instruction only, it was hoped that new styles of intellectual endeavor would be possible. By 1957 we all found ourselves half way across this bridge to a new scholarly style.

The faculty of the Indology College had all been trained in British-style scholarly methods but they had each hoped to use their training to discover an India the Orientalist biases of the British had systematically steered around. Raj Bali Pandey, the Principal of the College and a local Brahman trained in both traditional and British settings, took it upon himself to challenge the British arguments about the Aryan invasion, the marginal role of women and the lack of political institutions in Indian culture. His arguments predated the sophisticated analyses of the term 'orientalist' that would come later, but his interest in the thought of Friedrich Max Müller indicated an early interest in what motivated the orientalists. While in the class Dr. Pandey directed his attention to challenging the British reading of India, in his own widely read study of the *Hindu Samskaras* (a topic with no place in the curricula of that day) he showed how he hoped that the content of a more traditional education might eventually be placed before the scholarly world. There were two other traditionally educated scholars that had gone on to receive some training in the British mold and Dr. Pandey had recruited them to help him develop what he hoped would be a bridge into a new form of scholarship. V.S. Pathak was deeply immersed in the ritual life of Banāras temples when he underwent training in Epigraphy. When he learned that the epigraphy of the exams would continue to be limited to the inscriptions of Asoka and the Sanchi *stūpa*s, he turned his attention to the *purāṇa* texts long despised by British scholarship. Alas, he could never figure out what part of the Purāṇa Project might be of interest to Western scholars, or, indeed, how to get his translations of temple inscriptions included in courses on epigraphy. As a young scholar V.S. Agrawala

had been able to use his family's extensive connections to photograph temple art throughout India and develop an embryonic sense of how the worship of the many Indian deities spread from region to region. The Art and Architecture exams of the College of Indology were, however, rigidly restricted to the texts of Coomaraswamy and Rowland that British scholarship had long recognized, and they paid minimal attention to the regional and temple art that interested Agrawala. In the 1950s the British exam system, which still defined every aspect of the university's life, made it virtually impossible for traditionally trained scholars, even when they had made an effort to engage British scholarship, to introduce new scholarly interests to their students.

The two other faculty members in the Indology College at that time were less directly indebted to the Principal of the College for their positions, and when they pushed ahead with their intellectual interests they soon found themselves leaving the College and spending the latter part of their careers teaching in North America. A.K. Narain had already published his definitive work on Indo-Greek Coins, but he made no secret of his opposition to the British/Brahman ideology that still defined the academic atmosphere of India at the time. As a Bihar Kāyastha he was anything but a Brahman, and he and his uncle had been the most prominent of the converts to Buddhism getting headlines at the time. Within the anti-Brahman circles of the university he was often mentioned as a possible candidate for Vice Chancellor, but his greatest long term leverage came from the fact that he was recognized in North America as one of the outstanding examples of a new style of Indian scholarship, and he had a more or less open invitation to join the faculty of History in Madison, Wisconsin. In 1957 he was still pushing hard for change within the College in Banāras.

While Narain fought for a new style of academic life in the university's corridors of power, T.R.V. Murti found the struggles for power going on at the time distasteful. His book, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism,* had brought him worldwide renown, and the steady stream of scholars coming to visit and study with him made him curious about the intellectual worlds that lay beyond the College of Indology. It would be another decade before he would actually leave the College and begin to use a department of Religious Studies in far off Canada as his base, but it was already clear in the 1950s that he was eager to move beyond the culturally narrow questions British scholarship had focussed on when it controlled the academic institutions of India. In Murti's view philosophy should be dealing with universal questions, and in his understanding the classical texts of Vedanta were one of the best examples of philosophical questions being asked in the right way. Murti had been brought to Banāras during the period when Radhakrishnan had served as Vice Chancellor and had been authorized to take the most renowned scholars from all regions of the country and turn Banāras Hindu University into the intellectual center of the nation. That plan had worked well in Science and Engineering where South Indians, Bengalis and Maharashtrians would continue to be academic leaders, but in the Arts generally the local Brahman establishment had resisted the plan and a Smārta Brahman from

South India such as Murti was gradually forced to function as an isolated academic island. In his famous book on Mādhyamika, Murti had used the training he had received from British teachers in order to draw out relevant comparisons between Western philosophical figures and the Indian philosophical schools, but discerning readers could see, even there, that his real genius lay in being able to recognize the logical patterns in the arguments of the classical philosophical schools. This particular philosophical skill he had learned from the pandits of the Smārta schools of his youth, and the adaptation of it that characterized his famous book still depended heavily on his early training. Although by the 1950s his seminars were made up largely of scholars from all over the world, the scholarly style he had adopted owed a great deal to his early training and consisted in a transcribing of the language of the classical texts and an explanation of the philosophical argument involved. Although he seldom mentioned what he considered the disorienting questions raised by British philosophy, in the 1950s it was in Murti's seminars that one could find a scholarly initiative that took one deep into India and beyond the still pervasive structure of a colonial education system.

What was most difficult to understand about the Banāras Hindu University in the 1950s was how the student protests of the day were tied back into the British legacy. Let me try to explain our experience. When we arrived in New Delhi in 1957 and were preparing to take the train to Banāras we were invited to a garden party where Vice President Radhakrishnan and Prime Minister Nehru were to welcome a group of international students. In many ways this was quite an honour, but my most vivid memory of that afternoon is one of ornate table cloths and servers in turbans fashioned much like that of the *rājā* in the Air India ads. In spite of Nehru's high profile on the world stage, a line between colonial and post-colonial styles had not yet been drawn in the day-to-day work of Indian politics. If the ornate tea was the lingering colonial face of the government, the artificial student protest in Banāras was structured like a Gandhian fast. When I was asked to add my voice to the protest a few days after arrival, I nervously cried out '*zindābād*' to the thousands joined together in a torch-lit rally. The next day, while Frank and I sat on his cot as token foreign supporters, Dada (Satish Kumar) took a Gandhi-like vow to fast unto death. At that moment I hoped that the students were overthrowing the British legacy, but I was soon to learn that the student 'cause' was deeply entangled in the self-interest of the local Brahmans, and that they in turn were one of the groups the British had learned to use in order to ward off Gandhi's more revolutionary ideas. Chandrasekhar, who would briefly serve as Prime Minister twenty years later, explained to me at my first rally that he had been retained by the CIA, and in his role as PSP leader he was expected to disrupt Nehru's plans for the university. He explained that he had been chosen because through local Brahman ties he had connections to the Principals of the Arts and Indology Colleges and if the demand for the open admission of local students was realized one of them would become Vice Chancellor and the dream of creating an all-Indian university would be undone. The battle lines outlined quickly that night would still characterize the life of the university for decades to come.

Meeting Prime Minister Nehru

When the British took over the rule of India in the early nineteenth century they said they would use the Christian institutions for the good of the Indian people and would educate a class of 'brown Englishmen' to enlighten their fellow citizens. In 1957 skeletal remains of these two projects were still to be found in Banāras, and it took considerable effort to learn that they were not the best channels to use in discovering the India of one's dreams.

Chittapur Village

Soon after our arrival in Banāras Frank and I moved from the International House into a student residence and began the process of letting our student friends introduce us to the Banāras they knew. Their favorite trip was to the Saṅkaṭ Mocan temple of Hanumān where they prayed for help with their exams. Trips to the ghāṭs and the crowded temples of Viśvanāth were less comfortable for them because they sensed that there were ritual rules involved that they did not fully understand. The son of the Bengali widow who swept the house of the Neeches was an M.A. student and took a mischievous delight in irritating the Neeches by making himself my regular guide and taking me to semi-forbidden places such as the Bengali widow houses, the famous Banāras hospices nearby, and the hangouts of various male and female ascetics. He was comfortable in all these places because he had accompanied his mother there as a youth, but I saw only enough to realize that there was a profoundly

old institutional pattern here that I would only understand years later when some of my students would do extensive research work in Banāras. My own discovery of the real (pre-British) India began with my introduction to the Chamār (*camār*, traditional leather workers) section of Chittapur village.

Pular accompanied the basketball team to the national championships and looked after the balls and did other errands. On the trip he and I talked late into the night about his village and when we got back he could not wait to take me there. Walking along the outer side of the ten-foot wall around the university we soon came to the brick houses of the upper caste villagers and then crossed through a deep gully made by the drains of the university and arrived within the tight cluster of mostly mud houses that made up the Chamār *bastī* or residential area. Pular pointed out his small hut near the entrance to the *bastī* but then insisted that we go directly to the central area where Raja supplied the men of the village with *bīḍī*s or local cigarettes from his little shop in front of which the leaders sat in a semi-square by pulling three cots around facing Raja and his shop. After introductions Raja ordered everyone off the cot to his left and offered me that honored seat. Pular, I was to learn later, was not a long-standing member of the *bastī* and was expected to go to the back of those now standing around the courtyard, and Boodai excitedly sat down beside me, only to get up almost immediately when his older brother Rajaram arrived. As Rajaram twisted his handlebar moustache the jokes started as I recognized how immaculately he was dressed and was told by him and by others that he was the head *caprāsī* or messenger of the Principal of Science College. During this explanation of Rajaram's status, Baij Nath arrived to sit on the other side of me and explain that he and some others he pointed out were rickshaw drivers and they were strong and made a lot more money than those who worked in the university at menial jobs. Making sure that the social analysis was complete, Raja quickly threw in that his wife cooked for one of the professors and both his sons had prestigious jobs in the university. Only when I asked did they explain that there were still present in the village older men who had once worked at the traditional Chamār occupation of leather working.

Boodai insisted that the group gathered in front of Raja's shop not waste this opportunity to get back to the topic they had been discussing in recent days. Should the *bastī* try to get a government grant and build a culvert along the deep gully that apparently flooded the area between the two halves of the village every rainy season? Boodai explained that he talked about this project almost every day with Cherion Thomas, the Bhoodan worker assigned to the university, but he had been frustrated by the lukewarm interest among his fellow Chamars. I told him I had met Cherion Thomas at the reception hosted by Nehru and Radhakrishnan the day we arrived in India and I had visited with him a few times at the university, but at that time I had no tie to Chittapur and this project had not come up. Suddenly Boodai's scheme seemed to have the connection it needed, and everyone sitting around assured Boodai that he should push on with his idea. A fortnight later the Bhoodan[1] leader, Jaya Prakash

1 In 1957 the Bhoodan (*bhūdān*) Movement was prominent in the news and recognized

Narayan, came to the university for a major speech. While he was there he arranged to re-introduce me to Chittapur village and to ask me to help them to move ahead with the Gramdan (*grāmdān*) plan, which he described as something the village had adopted some years back.

The next day I sat on a cot in front of Raja's store and listened to the story of the earlier Gramdan plan. In order to put a human face on his story Raja asked villagers to bring Chedi Lal, and in just minutes a twelve-year-old hobbled up on a bent stick fashioned into a crutch. Raja explained that a few years back he had fallen from a bicycle and broken his leg and it had never been set right. (Raja was eager to go on but agreed that I could take the boy to a hospital later and see if anything could be done.) The story Raja wanted to tell was of the father of the boy, also called Chedi Lal, who was described by Raja as a *mahātmā,* a *guru,* or an *avatār,* as others mocked his search for the right label. Raja wanted to focus on the Gramdan phase of the story, but Boodai insisted on going back to an earlier chapter in which the elder Chedi Lal is said to have been taught to read by the South Indian Christian lady in the Women's Hostel for whom he had worked as *caprāsī.* He was said to have read the Bible from cover to cover and also learned to read books in Hindi and Sanskrit. When Raja got the floor back he explained that Chedi had brought Bhoodan leaders to the village and after many meetings the entire 'Harijan Bastī' had given away everything they had and had become a Gramdan Village. In Raja's mind that led us back to the present and the fact that when they had become a Gramdan Village they had decided to do something about the floods that left them with only a precarious bamboo bridge to the rest of the world every rainy season.

Although Raja was not pleased, another group of villagers who had been patiently waiting now took over the storytelling. They explained that Chedi had married an educated woman who had taught cleanliness and some literacy to the village women, but that she had died in childbirth. After that Chedi had changed and spent much of the day singing songs of Kṛṣṇa and Rāma. Although these songs were new to the Chamārs, some families had started to learn from him and they still carry on that ritual singing every Sunday afternoon. They described themselves as *bhagat*s or devotees and invited me to join them. After they finished their part of the story they left and Raja explained that these families had split the solidarity of the village. He said he was sure Chedi had never intended that these songs of the upper castes' religion would become the only ones sung and, more important, that these *bhagat*s would refuse the meat biryani and toddy served at weddings in the village. He insisted that every single person in the village had been present when Chedi died just three years after his wife and was buried in the shrine on the hill where they still went to worship

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throughout the world as the continuation of Gandhi's work. In 1951 Vinoba Bhave had initiated the idea of people donating their landholdings for the use of the landless laborers. This idea had been extended to become a Gramdan (*grāmdān*) when whole villages were donated or a Shramdan (*śrāmdān*) when people donated their labor for a public project. By 1957 the leadership of this general movement had been handed on to Jaya Prakash Narayan who called it Sarvodaya or the Service of All.

him as a *Bīr* or eternal being. Later that evening almost half the village went to the shrine with us as I learned how to let Chedi's spirit seep into mine.

At Home

When my exams were finally over I moved into Chittapur and started to be fed and cared for by the wives of Pular, Boodai, Rajaram and Raja. We were able to get Chedi Lal's leg operated on, and started making plans for the sixty foot long culvert (*pul*) that would eliminate the flooding during the rainy season. The government paid a rupee and a half for a day's labor, so we could keep buying bricks, and in the end the government, the Bhoodan representatives and the upper caste villagers all figured out how to take some of the credit for this accomplishment.

What was most interesting to me was the way the Chamārs used so many traditional means of maintaining solidarity in order to keep the community focussed on this task. Raja would not let any work start until every single family had contributed five rupees and promised a certain number of days of labor. The last two hold-out families had to be harassed repeatedly before they joined in. He then insisted that the senior member of the five founding families of the *bastī* (the traditional *pañcāyat*) at least endorse the choice of the new *pañcāyat* of five that met every night to assess the progress of the project. From the beginning my role had been peculiar. Chamārs think of themselves as laborers and they dug out the foundation area and carried the bricks on their heads with relish, but when bricklaying started they would not touch a trowel. I, on the other hand, as a brash American, was willing to fall back on a few hours of childhood participation in that task and served at the beginning as the only *mistrī* or bricklayer. It was not long before real *mistrī*s coming and going from the grand temple being built just over the wall of the university began to stop for an hour or two and straighten out (especially on the arched top of the culvert) my work, and some of the Chamārs came to realize that they too could do a pretty good job of laying bricks.

A few days before we were to finish, a sign went up naming this structure 'Paul Babu's Pul' and we had to negotiate how to get rid of that. The argument was that if the sign did not stay the other idea was to put a picture beside that of Chedi in his mausoleum. That seemed a bit better in that only Chamars would see it and I certainly felt his spirit right beside us as we worked, but it was still a bit awkward to be in association with a *Bīr* while still alive. They were unclear if *Bīr* had any connection with the Muslim practice of showing reverence to *Pīr*s, or the Hindu practice of burying ascetics (sometimes called *Vīr*s), but everyone else in the village was cremated and being buried was certainly a practice with a lot of religious overtones. Fortunately, they did not own cameras in those days so I thought I had won my point until many years later I discovered a small photo of my South Indian wife and our first son Prakash that I had sent them tucked into a corner below that of Chedi.

Visiting Banāras since these early introductions has always felt like coming home. After I married in South India, my devout Cettiar co-brother wanted to visit the true home of Śiva and I learned with him as the priests on the ghāṭs and at the

Viśvanāth temple mustered up their best Tamilized Sanskrit in order to teach him the ritual rules. My students Lynn Teskey Denton and Anne Pearson outlined to me in detail how the ascetic community was organized and why women found so much meaning in their ascetic vows (or *vratas*), and in the process taught me about the Banāras that in my pioneering visit I had just been able to find a superficial comfort in. My colleague David Kinsley later watched exorcisms I had never seen, and my student Chris Justice took dozens of pictures of those who arrived in the fabled hospices determined to release their spirit within the sacred confines of Banāras. For all of us, Banāras turned out to be a golden opportunity to learn, but we never learned exactly what we thought we would. The city is a kind of universal mother, one who welcomes adopted children with as much warmth as if they were her own, but her river flows on past Harijan *bastīs,* quiet hospices, and burning ghāṭs and one has to be prepared to let her make a place for you where she will.

Formative Encounters? Field notes of Banāras

István Keul

Prologue

I must introduce my essay with an explanation: there are so many protagonists in it that I chose not to name their names in the main text. Their relegation to mere footnotes does not mean that I am ungrateful – on the contrary. I am just trying to maintain a certain linearity of my narrative, which is difficult enough even without the names. I feel particularly bad about this when I think of the many Banārsīs who helped in so many ways, shared their thoughts, and opened their homes to me, and whose names are not to be found on the cover of books or in scholarly journals. And then there are, of course, the many teachers, colleagues, fellow sojourners, writers, 'scholarly co-pilgrims,' whose names would instantly conjure up the many works authored or influenced by them. The voices and figures of them all are woven into the vivid memories of my stays in the city, and became alive again when, in preparation for the conference, I went through my field notes taken in those months.[1]

My essay has three major themes that partially overlap: the circumstances and stages of my encounter with Banāras, the stages in the development of a research topic, and reflections on fieldwork, field notes, and reflexivity. To illustrate these themes, I have included in the endnotes selected excerpts from my field notes. I focus especially on the first weeks of my stay in Banāras, but I will also give brief comments on later developments whenever necessary.

Preparations

My first stay in India in the mid-1990s was spent almost entirely in Banāras. I lived there for nearly a year (with interruptions) and since then I have returned many times for shorter or longer visits, often on a stopover when embarking on fieldwork to

1 I would like to warmly thank Heinrich von Stietencron, Vasudha Dalmia, and Jörg Gengnagel for guiding me *to* Banāras. For their constant support *in* Banāras I am especially grateful to Shashank Singh, Rana P. B. Singh, Anand Krishna, Bhagiratha Prasada Tripathi, Virendra Singh, Bettina Bäumer, and Rakesh Kumar Singh. Kamlesh Datta Tripathi and Kedarnath Vyas were of considerable help in various stages during the initial phase of my stay. During the early months in Banāras I was fortunate to meet Falk Reitz, Shrikrishna Pathak, Raj Bhan Singh, Baijnath, Shyamlal, and Bharat, Shamil Vayot, Goutam Merh, Satya Swarup Mishra, James Pokorny, Marc Katz, Pickett Huffines, Niels Gutschow, David Kinsley, Richard Lannoy, Josef Winkler, Mark Dyczkowski, Hans Wettstein, Reinhold Schein, Annette Wilke, John Dupuche, and others.

other parts of the subcontinent. When I went to Banāras for the first time, I had just finished my third year as a student of *Religionswissenschaft* (the study of religions), Indology, and German literature at the University of Tübingen. At the department in Tübingen, students were encouraged to combine the study of religions with one of the area studies offered at the university. And in Indology, the minor I chose as the area of specialization to complement my major, the study of religions, it was quite common during their undergraduate studies for students to go to India for six months or a whole year, mainly to improve their language skills and read classical Sanskrit texts at an Indian university or with private teachers. The Universities of Poona and Baroda were my first choices, and I sent out application letters. While waiting for replies, the idea of Banāras cropped up, gradually became stronger, and finally won out, despite the admission letters that had arrived in the meantime from the two universities. In the weeks before my first encounter with the city, my academic teachers in Tübingen guided me in the preparations for my stay in Banāras by recommending specialized literature, by selecting Sanskrit texts – mainly philosophical writings – to be read with the help of local pandits, and by writing letters of introduction to various scholars, including a professor of philosophy and Sanskrit at the Banaras Hindu University (BHU), and an art historian and eminent cultural personality, both of them well-known and highly respected authorities in their fields and beyond. Further, we also reflected together on what topics might be suitable for a first, exploratory socio-ethnographic study in an Indian context.

A few years previously, I had been part of a research team that studied a charismatic, neo-Pentecostal movement in Tübingen. We observed and participated in church services, visited the movement's meeting places, designed a questionnaire, conducted interviews, and applied other methods of quantitative sociology.[2] Which means that, although as a young Indology student I found myself understandably enough under the influence of the rather philology-heavy approach of classical German Indology, when I left for India I was also in the fortunate position of having dabbled in a relatively wide range of methods from the methodological toolbox of a modern academic study of religions. In addition to having passed two levels of Hindi and Sanskrit courses and a range of introductory seminars on the cultural history of India, and to having acquired some understanding of philological-historical methods, I also had systematically studied (non-Indian) lived religion. I was still far short of being thoroughly trained theoretically and methodologically when I left for India, but it seems to me now that I was fairly well prepared, even if this was not what I thought at that time.

The list of potential research topics that I ended up carrying with me reflects the inexhaustible treasure trove that Banāras represents for students of religions, but also the available literature I was able to build on.[3] Looking at the list from a distance of

2 See Gering et al. 1994. The coordinator of the project was the sociologist of religions Günter Kehrer, an inspiring academic teacher to whom I remain deeply indepted for his guidance and support over many years.

3 The first book I read in preparation for my stay in Banāras was – quite naturally – Diana Eck's *Banaras: City of Light*. While I remember holding her beautifully written, historical

almost two decades, it also reflects a certain degree of confidence my teachers obviously must have had in my abilities, for which I will always be grateful to them. The list contained a number of options:

- A survey of the complex of temples and other sites on Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ, with a special focus on Maṇikarṇikā Kuṇḍ, located in the middle of the ghāṭ, a tank with steps whose waters are said to flow directly from the source of the Ganges in the Himalayas. The myths of origin of the tank, recounted in a number of Purāṇas, are connected to both Viṣṇu and Śiva, and pilgrims to Banāras bathe here after having completed their pilgrimage circuit. The foci of my inquiry would have been the relevant text passages in the eulogical text *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*, and the observation and documentation of the religious and other activities at the site. In interviews, I was to inquire about the motivations and expectations of the visitors to the site.
- An exploration of past and present developments around the Viśvanāth temple, including its history, its various locations, and the priestly lineages connected to it.
- An inquiry into the present importance of Hanumān in Banāras. The popularity of this divinity throughout North India was well known, as was his position as a mediator between the devotee and Rāma. One potential line of inquiry concerned Hanumān as an integral part of a local pantheon dominated by Śiva, while another was related to the social background of Hanumān devotees, who had been depicted in much of the earlier specialized literature as coming predominantly from lower and uneducated layers of society.[4]
- Observing the performance of the Rāmlīlā in Rāmnagar, reading selected passages from Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* and Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas*, and conducting a small survey among members of the audience, especially with regard to the ways in which the child actors are perceived as receptacles/carriers of divinity during the festival.
- A study of the *mahābrāhmaṇa*s (funeral priests) at the city's cremation grounds, with a focus on hierarchy, performance, and purity, and their importance and position in the city's 'economy of death.'

(and eulogical) work in high esteem, my teachers in South Asian studies rightly argued for the necessity of complementing the historical approach to some of the sites discussed in her book with ethnographic work highlighting their contemporary religious significance. Other readings included Parry 1980 and 1981; 1994 only later, Lutgendorf 1991, Kapur 1990, and Kumar 1988; 1992 only later. Among the works on Banāras I read during my first period of stay in the city were the edited volume (1993) and numerous articles by Rana P. B. Singh published in *The National Geographical Journal of India* (1987, 1988 and others) received from the author, as well as Gutschow and Michaels 1993 and Gutschow 1994.

4 The idea of approaching this topic from a contemporary, socio-anthropological perspective had its departure point in Heinrich von Stietencron's observations during his many years of fieldwork in Orissa and other regions of India.

- Reading, translating and studying introductory Nyāya and/or Mīmāṃsā texts,[5] with special focus on their epistemology and argumentation techniques.
- And finally, a less well-defined alternative was contacting specialists on Kashmiri Śaivism (whose contact addresses I carried), and reading and translating relevant introductory texts.

In the end, the topic chose me. Serendipity in anthropology, or the academic study of religions for that matter, is definitely underrated.

Arrival, and a note on my field notes

Armed with a great deal of advice, addresses, letters of recommendation, and specialized literature, I arrived in Banāras in the fall of 1994. When I went through my field notes and began writing this paper, I realized that, until recently, I have not had the occasion to assess more thoroughly the impact of my early encounters and experiences in the city. Reflecting on these first weeks and months in Banāras I tried to reconstruct and re-imagine events that may have contributed to my developing relationship with the city and with India, and influenced my biography, academic and personal. I also discovered in my records a number of features discussed in the specialized theoretical literature on field notes, for instance the fact that, especially in the early periods of my stay, my taking notes had the function of providing reassurance: I had gone to India with a task (or several tasks), found myself in unknown territory, and had to find my way through Banāras, and all that had to be documented and reflected upon. Thus my field notes turned out to be a combination of journal and running log written at the end of each day, of data and hard facts, ideas, and sketches, but also of brief vignettes with reflections and musings that were somewhat more elaborate, almost of a literary nature. So, I am using the term 'field notes' to designate various kinds of notes. My journal entries and the vignettes are an integral part of the field notes, that *contain* data (directly relevant 'hard data'), and at the same time *constitute* data, as they describe and document my thoughts and reactions in the field. From the very beginning I seemed to have been overly conscious of the importance of my notes, and as a kind of precaution against losing them, I used two notebooks, and recorded my thoughts and observations alternately. Going through my records, I did not have the impression that I had been using them as some kind of a Malinowskian garbage can. I did not seem to have experienced feelings of serious inadequacy and angst, due perhaps also to the fact that my fieldwork was meant to be of the exploratory type, and there was no real pressure to meet a deadline, which was an ideal state of affairs. That being said, I have to add that, re-reading these notes after many years, I found interesting insights (along with some forgotten material), but I also came upon passages I did not like. While the genuine openness and curiosity, and the resulting effervescence of thoughts and impressions in those early

5 Such as Annambhaṭṭa's *Tarkasaṃgraha*, Jayantabhaṭṭa's *Nyāyamañjarī*, Laugākṣibhāskara's *Arthasaṃgraha*, Kṛṣṇayajvan's *Mīmāṃsāparibhāṣā*.

months were clearly palpable in many entries, I was often taken aback by the naiveté of the 24-year-old me emerging from those lines in some cases. Reading, or better, perceiving what is in one's field notes, while deconstructing and reconstructing (con)texts, is indeed like reading back over one's own life.[6]

Encounters

As I already mentioned, my research topic found me. From the end of September, I stayed for a while in the southernmost part of the city in a guesthouse on Assīghāṭ, frequented by scholars and writers. The place seemed to be a good starting point for crossing the river to Rāmnagar to observe the Rāmlīlā, to deal with the registration formalities at BHU, and to use the library at the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS). In addition, it promised the opportunity to interact with other researchers. However, for a week or so in the beginning of my stay there, I was the only guest, the main reason being an outbreak of plague in Gujarat, with some cases reported in Banāras. My host and I frequently dined together, and on one of these occasions, hearing about my potential interest in Hanumān, he confessed to being a long-time and ardent devotee of this deity. From that point on, our extended conversations over dinner often centered on this topic, and I became increasingly sensitized to many aspects connected to the simian god. Over the weeks that followed, I started reading up on the subject, using initially mainly the library of the AIIS and later the university library as well. In addition to some older specialized literature, I was thrilled to discover inspiring recent and ongoing work on the topic, the author of which I was fortunate to meet some time later.[7] In the meantime, I had moved to the house of my Sanskrit teacher in Śivālā. In addition to language classes (Sanskrit with him, Hindi with another teacher to whom I am deeply indebted), long walks on the ghāṭs, observations of the cremation grounds, regular visits to the nightly performances of the Rāmlīlā, and to the nine temples that were central to the autumn Durgāpūjā, I began exploring the narrow lanes of the inner city, keeping an eye open for Hanumān shrines and trying to engage in conversation the people I saw worship the deity.

The notes of those early weeks in the fall of 1994 record heavy activity, with the making of many new acquaintances, Indian and Western, and the deepening of already existing ones. The head of the family that had virtually adopted me on the first night at the Rāmlīlā inquired on our second meeting what food they should prepare for me next time for the obligatory picnic. A BHU linguistic professor whom I approached at one of the Hanumān temples invited me into his home. My first host, the guesthouse owner, regularly invited me for dinner at his place, and continued to

6 See on these and related issues, for example, the contributions in Sanjek (1990).

7 Philip Lutgendorf's essays on Hanumān always made for fascinating reading, especially important to me being his essay 'My Hanumān Is Bigger Than Yours,' published in the year of my first stay in Banāras. In the following years he wrote more essays on the topic, before his intense and long-standing research on Hanumān materialized in a monograph published in 2007.

share with me stories from his family history and insights into his personal experiences with Hanumān. I met and became friends with a German scholar of Indian art history, I made the acquaintance of British writers and journalists working for the BBC, and had long conversations with an Indologist and her psychologist friend from Switzerland. The list could go on and fill a whole page or more. Of course, the inconveniences of everyday life did not pass unnoticed. In my records, one can read descriptions of the filth in the streets,[8] the loud construction work at the house of my new landlord, the ubiquitous and mischievous monkeys, the slightly Kafkaesque attempts to register at the Banāras Hindu University,[9] or the hours-long money-

8 'Stronger than usual it strikes me that, everywhere and anytime, people constantly spit, or blow their nose, or produce other things that end up on the streets. The main alleys seem to be somewhat cleaner, but even there the large heaps of waste collected daily by the sweepers are often nothing else than well-received gathering places for cows, dogs, and crows, who quickly and efficiently scatter everything, thus rendering the sweepers' work completely futile. In some of the narrow bylanes the stench never goes away. The residents throw their garbage on the street, and at every turn one comes across emaciated, defecating mongrels, goats, and calves. In the early mornings, the flat riverbank between Assī and Nagwa is lined with locals relieving themselves, and some parts of the ghāṭs are used as public toilets later in the day as well. The patches of stagnant water near the Ganges are used as trash receptacles and stink to high heaven, or, at least – at the slightest east waft – most certainly to the balcony where I usually sit and have breakfast.' The lines that immediately follow this passage seem to fit (on a very basic level) rather well into the idealizing projections found sometimes in past and contemporary imaginings of Banāras, as discussed, for example, in Travis Smith's presentation at our conference ('A Kṣetra Beyond Time: Traditional and Scholarly Imaginings of Vārāṇasī's Past'). So, here is how I continued, seamlessly: 'But in the Ganges dolphins are playing gaily, as do the ragged little children flying their kites over the neighborhood's rooftops. The colorful, rustling kites tug at their strings, soaring higher and higher, to altitudes from where all such details as filth and excrement are blurred, blending into an ever-impressive bird's eye view of Vārāṇasī, the eternal city on the Ganges' (The green diary, October 1994). If there was any tongue-in-cheek attitude between these lines – and I very much hope there was! – unfortunately it is not very conspicuous.

9 'Today I had actually planned to submit my application of formal affiliation with the BHU. First I had to get it typed in three copies. I was able to persuade a young man in a typing office to do me the favor of preparing the copies for me right away, which he swiftly did. Then I hired a cycle rickshaw and rode to professor T.'s residence, who acknowledged in writing (on my copies) that the application was justified: 'forwarded, Prof. T., date XY.' I then went to BHU's Central Office, from where I was sent directly to the Faculty of Sanskrit Learning and Theology, where I asked for an audience with the Dean. The Dean went through my papers and found them all right, which he noted down on the application (forwarded, Prof. P., Dean etc., date XY). I went again to the Central Office, to submit my papers to the Registrar. There, I was directed successively to a number of different employees, to all of whom I explained the purpose of my visit. Finally, the person who seemed to be in charge of such cases said that, unfortunately, the Dean should have written that he endorsed my application, instead of only 'forwarding' it. Therefore, he could not process my request. I hailed another cycle rickshaw and rode back to the Faculty of Sanskrit Learning and Theology, where the Dean graciously agreed to receive me once again. I explained to him what had happened, he studied my papers thoroughly once again, made a few phone calls, and

changing procedures at the bank. But – if one trusts the notes, and I do – these were marginal issues. Much more elaborate is the treatment, for example, of the pleasant ride on one of the large, canopied boats on the last evening of the Durgāpūjā. The sight and sounds of the countless processions carrying goddess images to the Ganges and immersing them in the water is one of my most vivid memories from that time. Other such moments recorded in my notes are, for example, the re-enactment of the mythological sequence from the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* in which Kṛṣṇa subdues the snake Kāliya by dancing on its many heads,[10] or the nocturnal return by boat from Rāmnagar after a fascinating, pleasant evening spent immersed in the crowds, watching the performance of Rāma's story.[11]

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wrote then two more lines on the application. Finally, in the late afternoon, my three copies ended up on a desk in the Central Office, and for now, from tomorrow, BHU will be closed for eight days of holiday' (The green diary, October 1994).

10 'The venue was the area at and around Tulsīghāṭ, and when I arrived there well ahead of time, I was surprised to see that a large number of people, boats, and police personnel were already present at the site. I tried to secure a higher spot to have a better view of the event. A young boy in an orange-colored attire standing on a balcony seemed to have been chosen to play the role of Kṛṣṇa. He wore jewelry and an elaborately adorned headgear. After about an hour, the performance began. In the meantime, the audience had increased to around 6–8,000 people, if not more, a more exact estimate being difficult due to the fact that spectators were standing on every level of the neighboring ghāṭs, too, and more and more boats crowded with people gathered around the spot. The performance itself was rather brief: 'Kṛṣṇa' pretended to play his flute, then crawled from his balcony onto a sturdy wooden pole that was fixed with ropes to several surrounding buildings, plonked into the water, and resurfaced riding on a mockup snake pulled by several young men. They all swam to the shore, where 'Kṛṣṇa' was garlanded by the Kāśī *nareś*, the *mahārājā* of Banāras, who had made a spectacular entry shortly before the play commenced. After they swam another round, 'Kṛṣṇa' and the 'snake' left the water and an *ārtī* (offering of light) was performed, the addressee of which seemed to have been both Kṛṣṇa and the goddess Gaṅgā. Then, everything was over. The actual performance did not last longer than maybe 15 minutes, but many people in the audience had perhaps spent altogether more than four or five hours to prepare, come to the site early, watch the performance, and return home. I quickly changed my position to have a better view of the dispersing crowd. Many people were dressed festively, and I also noticed that there was a special area in the middle of the steps that had been reserved for women, an area from which they had an unobstructed view of the performance. On the margins of this space and on the neighboring ghāṭs still covered by the thick sediment of silt washed up by the river in the monsoon, stood mostly men. The balconies and even the rooftops of the adjacent buildings had served as stands for spectators eager to watch the Kṛṣṇalīlā, Kṛṣṇa's play. Now that the performance was over, a dense crowd poured into the much too narrow lanes leading from the ghāṭ area to the main street, where all traffic was instantly and hopelessly brought to a halt. In spite of some slightly chaotic moments, the atmosphere was serene, and I 'swam' effortlessly with the crowd until I reached home' (The green diary, November 1994). A few weeks after watching and recording the event I discovered a detailed description of the Kṛṣṇalīlā in Katz (1993: 52f.), in a copy I had received from the author at the beginning of my stay.

11 After a long and detailed description of the Rāmlīlā proceedings, and of the scenery at and around the event, I concluded the day's notes with a vignette on the boat ride on the Ganges

Hanumān

The pages of my notebook reveal how the idea of Hanumān as a research topic gradually took shape: summaries of and reflections on the long, meaningful conversations with my host in the first days of my stay; a preliminary, very selective list of the locations of Hanumān temples my interlocutor considered significant; reports of my attempts to locate these temples along with short descriptions of the sites; reflections on the reactions of random partners in conversation to my bringing up for discussion the topic of Hanumān. Then the idea suddenly gained momentum after a meeting with a dynamic and highly knowledgeable cultural geographer, who took my – until then still somewhat half-hearted – project seriously and offered generous and enthusiastic support, a support that would develop over the years to become a long and fruitful collaboration. The next day, on his recommendation I visited a traditional scholar and respected authority on the city's religious topography living right in one of the important religious focal points of the city, at Jñānavāpi near the Viśvanāth temple. Although obviously busy with other commitments, the pandit guided me in the space of less than half an hour to nine or ten Hanumān shrines in his immediate neighborhood. Until then, I had not been fully aware of the fact that so many places of worship were dedicated to this deity. Eager to see more, I was therefore extremely delighted when these two eminent local experts (the cultural geographer and the pandit) agreed to help me explore the inner city's narrow lanes in search for Hanumān temples.[12] The encouragement and guidance I received from them in the early stages

from the Rāmnagar side to the southern ghāṭs of Banāras: 'It is almost midnight and time to leave. Day seven of the Rāmlīla is over. We are advancing slowly but steadily through the crowd, making our way towards the riverbank where countless boats are waiting. 'Our' boat is white, and looks elegant and quite new, too. I take my shoes off and am allowed to sit in the front. We have to wait. It takes half an hour until Baijnath gathers all his passengers, around 25. In the meantime, the elephants are brought to the watering place nearby. [...] The Ganges is dark and sullen, and the plunging oars are sucked in by her waters, and released again with a gurgling sound. A voice from the back of the boat begins to chant 'Sītā Rām, Sītā Rām', and instantly, many more voices reply, and the tune is passed on to the neighboring boats, never ceasing again until we reach shore half an hour later. It is almost full moon, and the city is asleep, nestled to the river. We reach Assīghāṭ, and everybody descends. I am looking for my shoes and find them finally under Baijnath's little grandson, who sleeps on them soundly ...' (The green diary, September 1994).

12 'We combed the narrow lanes of the central and northeastern neighborhoods in the old city, searching for Hanumān temples. Well, actually, only rarely did we search, for most of the time the pandit headed purposefully and energetically from one site to another, and seemed to find in the most impossible places exactly what he was aiming for: tiny, beautifully ornamented shrines, small statues in private houses, dark interior courtyards, or even underground. [...] We continued for seven or eight hours, arriving finally at one of the northernmost ghāts, Prahlādghāṭ, where we found another series of temples well worth seeing. From the sites visited, I found the Mahāmṛṭyuñjaya temple complex highly interesting, as well as the temple in Ādampura (Hanumān Phāṭak). All in all we must have recorded between 25 and 30 temples and shrines of Hanumān, a fruitful day indeed' (The black diary, October 1994). The generous support extended by Rana P. B. Singh to scholars working on Banāras

of my fieldwork were invaluable and literally set me on track. Not only did we locate and plot a first batch of Hanumān shrines and temples, inaugurating what was to become over the years a systematic survey of religious sites related to this deity, but I received a practical demonstration of fieldwork tailored to this specific environment, including, for example, how to find and interact with potential interlocutors at the sites.

Hanumān shrine in the Mahāmṛṭyuñjaya temple complex

Over the coming months, Hanumān became one of my constant preoccupations.[13] I read everything that was available on the subject, spending many days at the library, trying to understand the development of the figure from the earliest times.

cannot be overestimated, and his numerous publications on the city's religious geography have long become essential reading. Pandit Kedārnāth Vyās has authored an important book on processions and religiously significant sites in Banāras (Vyās 1987, discussed, for example, in Gengnagel 2005). I am greatly indebted to both of them.

13 According to my notes (and my recollections), I went daily to Sanskrit and Hindi classes, and took sitar lessons two times a week. In addition to reading specialized literature and some works of important Indian authors (such as Premchand's *Godān*, for example), I also seem to have read (or re-read) numerous European, Russian, American authors, reflecting in my records on the importance of these works for regrounding a periodically drifting, punctually and tentatively native-going me. Among my other constant activities were the observation of numerous festivals and the attending of many cultural programs. And I made brief trips to places in Rajasthan and Orissa, which contributed to the rounding off of my first Indian experience.

Is Vṛṣākapi from the Ṛgveda a possible forerunner? What is Hanumān's role in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*? And in Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas*? How has the divinity evolved over the centuries, to achieve such obvious popularity in the present day? I was hoping to be able to reconstruct a history of Hanumān and his worship by looking at relevant texts, but also at architectural, iconographic, epigraphic, numismatic, and other sources. At the same time I felt excited about the prospect of exploring a thriving religious tradition, in addition to looking at testimonies of the past. Through the survey of various areas of the city, through the plotting of locations of shrines and temples (helped at first by the local experts and later on my own), I explored and discovered Banāras step by step. Soon, a dense grid of places of worship dedicated to Hanumān emerged, along with an awareness for their always complex, but different socio-religious environment. I finally selected two sites, drew up a questionnaire, and conducted a first – and quite tentative – sociological survey. By interviewing (with the help of a young local research assistant) dozens of visitors to the temples and shrines, a picture of Hanumān emerged that went far beyond the often very general and stereotyped remarks found in specialized literature.[14]

There were other perspectives, too. My emerging research in these initial weeks of my first stay did not pass unnoticed among the people with whom I had regular contact. Impulses for further inquiry came not only from my own intense involvement with the topic, but often arose from casual conversations. And, being constantly in the field over a longer period had the advantage that I was able to follow stories as they developed. One of these was to become especially important: the replacement of a damaged Hanumān statue in a small temple owned by my first host, and the ritual consecration of the new image. The planning process for the event had already begun when I arrived in Banāras. Various sculptors were commissioned to produce drafts and sketches of the new statue, conforming to the specifications given by the temple owner. Then, successive versions of the statue were created over several weeks, first in clay, then in plaster of Paris, before the final image was carved in sandstone. The family priest determined auspicious times for the ceremony, based on astrological calculations. A date was set, the old statue was ritually immersed in the Ganges, and the temple was renovated. The consecration ritual itself (performed in the first days of July 1995) turned out to be very elaborate and was three days long. I was fortunate to be able to document the entire event on film, and the description and analysis of the *prāṇapratiṣṭhā* ritual later became the first part of my dissertation that addressed ritual, historical, and sociological facets of the Hanumān cult.

The missing ethnographic self

I returned to Banāras three years after my first stay with a clearly defined research project related to Hanumān. Notebooks were filled this time, too, over a period of more than six months, and as tempted as I have been to include observations on these

14 Keul 1998. This survey served as the pilot study for the more comprehensive survey (with 344 interviews) that was part of my dissertation thesis (Keul 2002).

field notes in the present paper as well, I have decided to postpone this exercise for a later occasion. What is noteworthy, however, is the fact that both my extended stays in the city generated copious amounts of notes: lists, addresses, sketches of locations, descriptions of rituals and temple life, and interview records, but also reflections on – or stories of – my experiences, reactions, encounters. Looking back at the circumstances in which the dissertation took shape and the material on which it was based, and relating all this to the resulting text, I now feel that the outcome could (should?) perhaps have been slightly different. And I do not mean the frustrations we often have when we read our own former work and find it inadequate for some reason or another. In the light of the re-reading of my field notes, I am slightly disappointed and even perhaps feel some regret for having produced an overall standard type of descriptive, objectivist text (in spite of some clearly qualitative passages), being already well aware at the time that in ethnographic accounts subjectivity is unavoidable and a balanced reflexivity desirable. The existence of an 'anthropologist self' had been acknowledged for quite some years when I was writing the dissertation.[15] Having made this remark, I have to emphasize that the work, the perspectives chosen, and the methods applied within it turned out not to be to my detriment. It was favorably received and evaluated by a number of scholarship and hiring committees, and its importance for my subsequent academic career cannot be overestimated. The problem that I have, from a distance of more than fifteen years after starting work on that text, is that I am not sure anymore whether I really intended or attempted to be more experimental and reflexive in my writing at that time. I remember tentatively submitting a couple of rather heterogeneous chapters to my doctoral advisors in the early stages of the work, but I cannot recall their reaction anymore, or mine to theirs. So, one can only speculate whether the monograph on Hanumān would have turned out differently had it not been conceived as a dissertation thesis.

Formative encounters?

After two long and several shorter stays in Banāras in the mid- and the second half of the 1990s, my Indian experience continued. I went on to work on other topics in different regions, carrying out field research in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and Mumbai, but also in other parts of the subcontinent. Outside of South Asia I conducted fieldwork in connection with projects on Romanies in East-Central Europe and on a new religious organization in Japan. In more recent years I returned to Banāras exploring the transformations of the Yoginī traditions there.[16] In most cases, research was carried out combining various methods, including ethnographic and philological-historical. Naturally, my early experiences in applying these approaches had a far-ranging impact on later work. If we narrow down the focus strictly to data collection (observation, interviews), analysis, and interpretation, the sociological survey conducted among Hanumān devotees

15 Among the early key publications on reflexivity in anthropology are Rabinow 1977, Crapanzano 1980, Ruby 1982, Clifford and Marcus 1986.

16 See Keul 2012.

was chronologically speaking not the first such attempt, as it followed the study of the evangelical movement mentioned before. However, it was in a close temporal proximity to the research in Tübingen, and was to a certain extent (in terms of lines of inquiry, evaluation methods, etc.) even modeled on it. Given these overlaps, the Banāras survey can be seen – with some imaginative power – as an indirect continuation of that earlier study, only under different circumstances and without the team of colleagues. Zooming out again to a wider angle, it was in the Hanumān pilot project in Banāras in 1994–5 that I had for the first time the opportunity to *combine* methods, tentatively at first, and to expand the approach and test its viability during my second stay three years later. The high relevance of the 'Banāras experience' becomes more apparent when looked at from an even broader, or holistic, if I may, perspective. It comprised a demanding, multi-faceted, and intriguing socio-cultural environment that constantly challenged whatever book knowledge I had, that facilitated communication and the fruitful exchange of ideas in many directions, that forced me to improve my logistical, organizational, and improvisational skills in everyday life and in my research, and that tested my adaptability and resilience. Of course, I cannot be sure whether I have become a better scholar because of my work in Banāras. But my stay there definitely made me eager for more.

So even if I am somewhat reluctant to conclusively answer the question regarding the formative influence of my first stay in Banāras, I obviously tend towards the affirmative. Perhaps it would be useful to wait another twenty years, try to operationalize this rather fuzzy concept of 'formativity,' and then include in the analysis all my field notes (future ones, too) produced in various cultural contexts. (Whether one would want to do this to one's field notes is, admittedly, another question.) Relieving these reflections of the momentousness they seem to have acquired, but keeping the personal tone, I would say that my first experiences in Banāras in 1994–5 were doubtlessly enriching in many ways, and I would not want to miss them. The logbook of that journey is brimming with opportunities, and I embraced many of them and also squandered some. One of the regrets I have is not having been able to maintain a lasting contact with warm-hearted people I encountered along the way. An image that often comes to my mind is an interior courtyard, a cot in one of its corners, close to the entrance of a Hanumān shrine, the frail and bent frame of the aged owner and *mahant* of the shrine as he sits there for hours in a row, listening attentively to the questions I hesitantly ask of devotees and encouraging the more reluctant ones to answer them. I fondly remember our conversations during afternoon hours when nobody came to worship and there was no one to ask. It was almost as if he had made my little research project his own, and I can still sense his unassuming, matter-of-fact support, warmth, and calm wisdom after all these years. Another regret of mine is not to have abided by the advice of one of my senior Banārsī teachers. When he saw me struggle with all those philosophical texts on logic and those on Vedic sacrifice, he said: 'Why don't you read more *kāvya* [literature/poetry]?' There are indeed moments when I think that perhaps I should have listened to him and dedicated more of my time to the reading of, say, Kālidāsa's works.

Instead of an epilogue

I conclude my reminiscences with two excerpts from my records, trying to accomplish two things at once, as they are also meant as pointers to further similar passages in the footnotes to this essay. I found numerous vignettes in the notebooks, impressionistic scenes focusing on a moment, an individual, or an episode from my day-to-day encounters with the city and its inhabitants. There are longer ones, like the description of the Rāmlīlā nights, or of scenes on the cremation *ghāṭ*. Others are much shorter, virtual one-liners, some of which make absolutely no sense to me anymore. While the following brief sequences are not going to sound particularly original or new to an audience with experience in India, in these and other pieces I believe I have found the (wide-eyed?) freshness with which I seem to have perceived Banāras during my first weeks there.

The man who never stands still

> One can see him often, somewhere between Assī and Godaulia, the man who never stands still. I got the impression that he is something of an attraction in the area, because few practice this kind of asceticism around here. The man who never stands still, never stands still. Even when not moving from the spot, he is permanently walking without advancing. The man who never stands still is obviously Śaiva, because he wears his hair in dreadlocks, has a topknot, and carries a trident. His body is smeared all over with ash, which gives him a grey-bluish tinge. His clothing is colorful and consists of innumerable small pieces allowing the skin to shimmer through everywhere. Orange predominates, but there are many other vivid colors as well. Around his ankles he wears small bells that are constantly ringing – a sign that he does everything correctly. I assume that if these bells stop tinkling, that would be a breach, and would mean a major setback on his way to liberation. I wonder how the man who never stands still solves this problem at night, when he sleeps. Or does he sleep at all? Anyway, it would be very, very interesting to introduce him to a colleague of his, another ascetic who has stationed himself on Assī not far from where I live, and whom I call 'the man who always stands still.'[17]

Ek lifāfā! (An envelope!)

> 'Ek lifāfā!' said the little boy, as he reached up and laid a coin on the counter that towered high above his head. The post office clerk, who was sitting on a low and squeaking chair, did not hear the little guy, nor could he see him, for even if the boy had stood on tiptoes he would not have been able to reach his hand through the window. He kept repeating tenaciously and with increasing vigor: 'Ek lifāfā! Ek lifāfā!' Then he glanced at me and smiled. He gave the impression of being proud to carry this responsibility, to have been sent out with an obviously important assignment, and looked very much determined to accomplish his mission. And now he stood

17 The green diary, November 1994.

there, with his engaging smile and his oversized and worn-out red sweater and blue trousers. 'Ek lifāfā!' he said once again, to everybody in the room. I reached out and lifted him up, and he did not seem to mind or to be surprised at all. The post office clerk – an elderly, good-humored man – looked at us expectantly over the rim of his glasses. The boy cleared his throat, held out the money and articulated: 'Ek lifāfā!' The clerk reached into a drawer, and pulled out an envelope. Then he took and examined the money, and finally – slowly and carefully – handed over the desired article. The boy took the envelope and wiggled his hips, signaling that my help was no longer required. I set him down, he skipped to the door and was gone.[18]

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18 The black diary, November 1994.

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